ELDERNOST: BOOK ONE

A CIRCLE OF IRON

"A very promising newcomer..."
- Locus Magazine

GREG BENAGE

A Circle of Iron

Published by Greg Benage at Smashwords

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Cover art: Wicked Cover Designs
Cartography: Tom Fayen
Digital Production: Jason G. Anderson

For Mashenka

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KRACE
ANDERLAND
CASTREX
MAINLAND
Eisenwald
THE AELDMONZ
THE GREENWELL
Tarnwood
Caldella
The Isle of Karma
Malta Islands
Adama Islands
The Pincer
THE CRESCENT SEA
AVERNESS OCEAN
Medibor
Lysera
AURILA
AMURA
CIMONA

Prologue

Turley whisked the coarse bristles of the brush across the pocked surface of the statue fragment, some small god or local spirit the city's builders had worshipped. Only the head of the statue had survived the insults and ravages of centuries. The face was very like a woman's, Turley thought, but with sharp, angled features and overly large eyes of a peculiar shape. One ear was concealed by fine, flowing hair, the stone worked so skillfully he almost fancied he could make out each intricate strand. The other ear was visible, the hair tucked behind it ever so delicately. The end of the ear had chipped off long ago, but from the lines of what remained, Turley imagined that it might have been tapered. *Like a horse's ear, almost.* He chuckled to himself at the image.

Stone rattled on stone behind him and Turley whirled around, his heart racing. Broken columns, crumbling walls and fallen stone blocks the size of houses greeted him silently. He slipped the dagger out of his belt and waited, holding his breath. After twice having his claims stolen by bravos and bandits, he'd decided to take a chance and venture deeper into the ruined city. He'd heard the stories of scavs going missing, but they were nothing new. He'd heard the rumors of wights in the ruins.

Turley grinned and shook his head. Stories and rumors never hurt anyone. Scavenging was a dangerous business, and he knew the risks. But they were nothing compared to the rewards. One good find, one rich source, and he'd never have to toil again. He could buy some land of his own, with peasants to till the soil. He could marry some high-born lady with big tits, wide hips and a slender waist. Maybe a widow, or better yet, a young maid with a dowry. A woman who could bring some assets of her own to the table, besides what she had between her legs.

If he found a big enough source, Turley could afford to be choosy.

He turned back to the stone head and grasped it firmly on either side. *This is it. This is the one*. He rolled the fragment to the side, straining with the heft of it, and studied the soil beneath. Dark, almost black. Rich and fine. Turley's pulse raced. He buried his fingers in the earth and dug around until they found the first stone, its surface rough and faceted. Turley uncovered it carefully. He blew on it, working it with his fingers to clear away the dirt. The object was an oblong crystal, roughly the size of a man's thumb. The scavs called it quint. It had some value in its own right—the small crystal would make for imposing stakes at the gambling tables—but it was more important to Turley for what it signified. He placed the quint in the wooden pan at his side and dug around until he'd extracted three more.

Like most scavs, Turley knew just enough about magic to tell a source from dead stone. Raw magic slowly leaked from an object such as the statue fragment over the centuries. As it did, it congealed in the soil, hardened and eventually formed a crystal. The four quints alone were more wealth than

Turley had ever possessed, but what they *meant* was that he'd struck it rich. The statue fragment was infused with magic. Some of it had leached into the soil, but not all. Not even a small portion of what was still bound into the stone.

Turley reached into his bag and withdrew the hammer and chisel. *Break it, bag it and get it back to town*. He placed the point of the chisel in one of the statue's eye sockets and raised the hammer. Before he could bring it down, his wrist was caught in an iron vise and the hammer dropped from suddenly numb fingers.

The figure that stood there was backlit by the setting sun, and Turley squinted into the fading light. He saw the face, and looked back at the head of the statue.

Oh . . .

Pain flared in Turley's throat and the world went red. Then it went black.

Chapter 1

The forest whispered. Caleb Thorn ignored it and kept running for his life. For a year or more when he first came to the Greenwell, he bent his ear to the incessant whispering and tried to make sense of it. The effort had only ever been good for a headache.

Even if he couldn't understand the whispers, he knew what they meant. The trees wanted his blood, same as the creature hunting him. He couldn't see the wight, couldn't even hear it over the whispering of the trees or the sound of his own wind rasping in and out, but it was back there in the wood somewhere. It was coming for him.

Light filtered through the canopy, and golden, glittering sheets angled down in the spaces between the trees. The Greenwell did strange things with light. Thorn could find his bearings in the wood with nothing more to guide him than the way the light fell, how the shadows played on the forest floor, or even how the moon cast its glow through the branches at night. The patch of forest through which he ran favored birch trees. They grew tall and straight with some space between them, and the sunlight hung there like the glowing walls of a magical castle out of some old story.

Thorn plunged on, his booted feet pounding the blanket of fallen leaves that covered the forest floor. Branches grasped and slapped at him, stinging his face and hands, and gnarled roots thrust up from the ground to ensnare him.

They're only trees. All but the infernal whispering was in his mind. The trees could not harm him. Still, it would take only one fall, perhaps just a stumble, and the chase would be over. The wight would have him. It would bring him down and its teeth would sink deep into his soft throat, and that would be the sorry end of Caleb Thorn.

How much farther to the damn hexing circle? Thorn tucked his chin down and willed strength into his burning legs. The wights knew him now. Each time, they were a little wiser and the circle had to be placed farther out. Each time, Thorn had to dance a little closer to death. Eventually the distance would be a few strides too great and he would die. Perhaps this was the time.

Thorn heard a branch snap above his head and didn't even have a chance to turn before the wight fell upon him. His momentum carried him forward and he stumbled, and then fell. They rolled together across the leaves and Thorn felt the wight's nails rake his chest, cutting through heavy cloth and leather. He felt its hot breath on his neck. Fangs tore at his throat, and he screamed.

Blind Tom's mastiff was the first to reach the wight. Thorn was face down in the duff, but he heard a vicious snarl and then the sickening sound of flesh tearing and bones ground to splinters between powerful jaws. The wight loosened its hold on him even as its body tensed, and Thorn heard a soft grunt.

Somehow, despite the massive beast clamped to its leg, the wight struggled to its feet. A man would have howled in pain, yelled a challenge or pleaded for his life. The wight was silent. Long, fine hair that was almost white flowed down its back, and body paint in deep blues and browns covered its pale skin. Thorn rolled onto his back in time to see the wight draw two curved bronze knives from its belt. One blade rose and then flashed down at the mastiff's neck.

The dog danced away before the blade could bite, as if it knew what was coming. It did, of course. The mastiff was well trained and the crew always took a bounty the same way. It always went the same way, and it always would. Until it didn't, and then someone would die. Not today, though. The mastiff leaped out of the wight's range, and the net came down. The cruelly hooked iron barbs pierced the pale flesh, and the creature began tearing at the net in a mindless frenzy. The barbs bit and dug deeper. The wight fell to its knees, flailing its arms and thrashing from side to side.

Thorn stood and pressed a hand to his bleeding throat long enough to be sure the wight was the only one dying. Then he drew the double-edged iron dagger at his side. His sword was with Blind Tom. He couldn't run a damn with it belted at his waist, and a sword slung over a man's back was about as useful as face powder on a mule. Mara drifted into the circle, gripping thin, straight knives in both hands, grinning and watching the wight with a different kind of hunger in her eyes. Big Odd stepped out from behind a tree that wasn't much larger than he was, leveling a longspear at the thrashing wight.

"Bleed it," Thorn said. "More will be coming. They'll try to cut us off before we can get out with what we came for. Let's finish the job."

Mara darted in and thrust once with each of her knives, opening deep, weeping holes in the wight's cheek and shoulder. Blind Tom's mastiff circled around in front of the creature, and Big Odd behind. When the wight turned to watch the dog, Odd put his spear all the way through its back and out through its belly. The wight's spine arched and its head fell back when Odd wrenched the spear free. Thorn moved in close and opened its throat through a gap in the netting.

Blood poured from the wounds and soaked the ground red. The wight's head lolled forward, and then it lifted its eyes to stare at Thorn. Odd put another hole in it with his spear to maintain a steady flow, and they all stood and watched the creature bleed out.

"A man bleeds when you cut him," Big Odd said. "So does a wight, but a wight *drinks* blood. Maybe that's why a man pisses and shits himself when he dies."

"Ash and air, but you're a dumb son of a bitch," Mara said. Then she went and sat down with her back against the trunk of an old oak.

"Odd ain't dumb, he's odd," said Blind Tom. He whistled and the mastiff trotted over to his side, tail swinging like a maul in the hands of a giant. Big Odd knelt in the bloody dirt and rested the shaft of his longspear across his

bulging thighs.

"Guess I'll get the teeth," Thorn muttered. He always got the teeth, and he always did the running. Mara did the knife work, and she was good with a bow, too, when the situation called for it. Odd handled the net and the philosophizing. Blind Tom salted the trees and took care of the hexing circle, because he was the only who knew how to do it and he was no good in a fight. The dog was his, too, and the mastiff always held up his end.

Even without the dog, Blind Tom was the most vital member of the crew. Inside the hexing circle, the trees didn't whisper. Thorn didn't know if it was the salt or the stones, but a wight couldn't sense a hexing circle until it was too late. Once inside, the trees couldn't tell it any secrets, like where the ambushers were positioned. By a wight's reckoning, inside a hexing circle it was as blind as Blind Tom.

Thorn's crew knew more about killing wights than anyone in the lands of the Old Empire, including the knights and soldiers whose job it was to do the killing. The wight's teeth would earn one gold mark, split four ways. Enough to live on for a month, perhaps two if they were frugal, which they never were. One kill a month, then, one bounty, and each time a longer run and a closer call.

Thorn had seen enough death that the fear of it didn't have much of a grip on him. There was no use running from it, unless you were baiting it into an ambush with a bounty on the line. He looked around at the faces of his friends. He wasn't afraid that a wight would someday bring him down. He was afraid he wouldn't die alone.

Chapter 2

The broken tower hunched at the edge of a stone road that stretched from the ruined city to the western verge of the Greenwell, where it abruptly ended. Thorn imagined its builders reaching the edge of the great wood and deciding there was no point in going any farther. From what he'd seen of the rest of the world, they might have been right.

Blind Tom said the tower and road both had been ancient when the Old Empire was born. In ages past, the tower would have guarded the western approach to the city. Its former glory faded and forgotten, it now served as the only inn to be found in the boomtown that had sprung up at the edge of the ruined city of Eldernost. The establishment was called the Duck, for the simple reason that someone had spiked a wooden mallard into the masonry above the entrance. Thorn had never met anyone would could recall when this had been accomplished, who was responsible, what it might signify or how the guilty party had come into possession of a wooden mallard.

The bounty-hunters sat at a long table crudely built from wooden planks and bearing the scars of iron knives and heavy tankards. If they could not be found sitting at this table, day or night, it was only because they had run out of sufficient funds to do so, and had been forced into the Greenwell to collect another bounty. Thorn judged it the best spot in the taproom. It was near the wall, along a stretch that remained in sufficient repair to keep the elements off of them. It was close enough to the great hearth to stay warm when the winter chill set in, but not so close as to be baked alive. And it offered a clear angle to the stairs a drunken patron was required to navigate to reach the common sleeping area on the second floor.

None of them spoke. Thorn never had much to say after returning from the forest. He wasn't sure whether his friends shared his preference for silence or simply followed his lead. There would be time for chatter in the coming days, but for now, he merely wanted to relax and enjoy the pleasant sensation of being alive. He rested an elbow on the table and smoked his pipe and tried very hard to think about nothing.

"Caleb Thorn!" It was a man's voice raised above the din of the evening crowd. By his tone, it was a man who thought himself quite important. Thorn ignored it and blew a ragged smoke ring at Mara, who scowled and waved the vapors away from her face.

Thorn heard several feet, heavy-shod, march across the room towards them. Still he did not turn. "Thorn," the man said again, this time right behind him. "The Lord of Eldernost demands an audience."

"I'd encourage him to take up the lute," Thorn said. "They say the pipes are easier to master, but I never met a piper I didn't want to hit. Everybody likes a lute."

Mara chuckled, and there was a moment of confused silence from the newcomers. The soldier cleared his throat. "He demands an audience with

you."

Finally, Thorn shifted on the bench and looked at the speaker. He was a man-at-arms, younger than Thorn but old enough not to be green, and dressed in the livery of Lord Viorno. He'd heard the soldier's name a hundred times and couldn't have called it to mind if someone was torturing him for it. "If I were looking for myself," he said, "I'd probably check the Duck."

"What if you were looking for yourself and you got lost?" said Big Odd.

The soldier looked at Odd and back at Thorn. Then his right hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. "My lord wants to talk to you. I'll either escort you to him, or drag you there in chains."

Thorn sighed. He drained the last of the ale from his wooden cup and set it back on the table. "I'll have the escort if those are the choices," he said, swinging his legs over the bench.

He led the soldiers out and walked down the road to the large red pavilion where Lord Viorno resided on those rare occasions when he visited the town. It was still more of a camp than a proper town, by Thorn's reckoning, and the Duck was its only permanent structure. With the exception of the tower, a man could choose between some manner of tent or shanty if he needed something over his head. By those modest standards, the lord's pavilion was a palace. Thorn was just glad Viorno hadn't confiscated the Duck.

His escort relieved him of his weapons, or at least the ones they could find, and prodded him inside. The pavilion was richly decorated for a house and downright opulent for a tent. There were heavy carpets laid down on plank flooring, a large, ornately carved desk and chair, a couple of campaign chests and a longchair that—in Thorn's opinion—commanded an uncertain and somehow feminine territory between a chair and a cot. There were side tables, hanging lamps, seating for distinguished guests and a tree for the lord to hang his armor on, if he had any.

Thorn moved into the center of the tent and stopped without needing to be told at the dirtiest and most well-worn spot on the carpet. He bowed, and thought it probably wasn't shallow enough to get him hanged. "My lord," he mumbled.

Lord Viorno was a Gray—that much was obvious at a glance. His hair was an unnatural silver and the eyes that peered out from dark hollows were an eerie golden hue that appeared to be lit from within. The lord's olive skin was creased enough that he clearly wasn't a young man, but beyond that it was anyone's guess. He might have been forty or a hundred. With the alchemical treatments his wealth and status afforded him, age had become irrelevant. The only trick was that the medicine called for a lot of magic, and the world didn't have much left to give.

But that, of course, was why a boomtown had risen from nothing but a broken tower on the edge of a ruined city so ancient only alchemists and wizards claimed to know its name. It was about the magic. It was about extracting enough of the stuff from the stone, and the earth, and the trees that

Grays like Viorno could dance with immortality.

Thorn, who had no particular fear of death but also no particular fondness for the finitude of life, was intensely envious.

The Gray watched him for a moment without speaking. "You are a bounty-hunter," he said finally.

Thorn wasn't sure if it was a question or not, so he just nodded.

"You hunt wights," Viorno said, and then continued before Thorn could nod again. "I'm told, despite any appearances to the contrary, that you are the best wight-hunter in Eldernost."

"My crew is. Are. The best wight-hunters, I mean." Thorn didn't like where the conversation was heading. If he knew anything about Grays, it was that nothing good ever came of one noticing you. For the Grays, a man who was good at making money was a good man to tax.

"I would like you to collect bounties for me," Viorno said.

"I already do that, m'lord. It's your decree that put bounties on wights, and I expect the gold I earn comes out of your coffers one way or the other." Thorn winced. He sounded like he was begging for a tax.

"You hunt the Greenwell?"

"I go where the wights are, and they tend to be in the wood."

"You hunt around the timber camps, then?"

Thorn shook his head. "Used to. Don't any more."

The Gray arched an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Too many wights. Bounty-hunting works on the idea that you can find one wight, trick him and then bleed him out before he realizes he's been tricked. The wights don't seem to care for your timber camps, and they come after them in packs. Sometimes more, in, uh…"

"Waves?"

"Yeah, there you go. And waves of wights aren't really the sort of thing a bounty-hunter goes looking for. Like I said, better to find one alone in the wood."

Viorno nodded. "Why do you suppose I've placed bounties on wights, Master Thorn?"

Thorn shrugged. "I guess you don't like wights. I've no fondness for them either, so I'm selling as long as you're buying."

"In fact, I don't like them because they raid my timber camps and my ruins, they feed on my loggers and scavengers, and every one they kill is like a gold mark plucked from my coffers."

"I'd say you got a legitimate grievance with the wights, m'lord."

"And yet, you take my gold and hunt for wights in the middle of nowhere —not the ones that are preying on my timber camps or marauding through the ruins, feeding on every scav they see."

Thorn shifted uncomfortably. "I guess a wight I take in the wood is one won't be troubling your loggers or scavs."

"I disagree, Master Thorn. I consider such a bounty a waste of money…

my money, which, between us, is the only money I really care about. Henceforth, bounty-hunting in the Greenwell is banned. Should you violate this prohibition, you will be hanged."

"What about the timber camps?" Thorn said. He'd promised his crew they'd never hunt the camps again, but maybe they could devise a new strategy to more effectively isolate the wights there.

"I've made other arrangements to secure my logging operations. My chief concern is the ruins."

"So you're saying I can only collect a bounty if I hunt the ruins."

"I am indeed, Master Thorn. I also expect you to spend six days of every week there. Your current practice of going out once every month, or less, does not suit my needs. For this service, I will pay you one gold mark per month."

"Plus the bounties on the wights we take?"

The Gray smiled and shook his head. "This retainer will replace the bounties."

Thorn's eyes narrowed. "We make that much taking a single wight."

"You did," Viorno said. "I'm restructuring your compensation."

Thorn bowed his head and sighed. "I'm not the right man for the job. I don't know the ruins—I know the wood. In the Greenwell, Blind Tom's dog can sniff out a wight, and it's just a matter of getting close enough for it to chase you. In the ruins, could be a wight lurking in every shadow and it'd be wiping your blood off its chin before you even knew it was there. And there's hundreds of scavs working the stone on any particular day. My little crew can't keep the wights off them all."

"That's why I'm sending my wizard with you. He has studied with the Schoolmen and knows well the lore of Eldernost." Viorno gestured to a figure standing to the right of his chair in the shadows at the back of the tent.

"Your wizard, m'lord?" said Thorn, squinting.

The figure stepped out of the shadows and revealed itself. Lord Viorno's wizard was fat. Thorn guessed he had to go three hundred pounds, at least. He was also young, just into his twenties if Thorn was any judge. The man was pale and pasty, and what hair he had hung lankly on his lumpy skull.

"I am Quinix," the man said, bowing.

"Okay," said Thorn.

"Quinix will be your guide in Eldernost," Viorno said, "and with his assistance, you will protect my scavs from the blood-drinkers."

Thorn shook his head. He tried to do it in a way that looked regretful. "I expect your wizard is a font of knowledge, m'lord. And I'm sure you can find someone with a knack for fighting wights in the city, but it ain't me or my crew. I can do more good for you hunting the Greenwell, same as always."

"It wasn't an offer, Thorn." Viorno cocked his head to the side and frowned thoughtfully. Thorn didn't like the looks of it. "I'm told you spend days, even weeks in the Greenwell on your little hunts. Is that true?"

"I guess so," Thorn said. "We don't spend any more time in the wood

than we have to, but sometimes it takes awhile to track and hex a wight so we can put it down."

Viorno nodded. "And what do you eat when you are in the field?" The Gray continued before Thorn could answer. "I have witnesses who will attest to your taking game from the wood. Are you aware the Greenwell is my demesne and that poaching is punishable by hanging?"

Thorn swallowed. Part of him was amused by Viorno's claim to the vast forest. His ancestral lands were miles away, near Orsina, but some duke or king had given him Eldernost and the surrounding land, as if it was theirs to give. It struck Thorn as a claim several thrones and every living wight would dispute. On the other hand, the Gray didn't need much reason to hang him, if he needed any at all. "I'd love to become acquainted with your witnesses, m'lord, since the only ones other than my crew I ever saw in the wood were blood-drinkers." He paused, thinking it through. "All the same, if I'm reading the situation correctly, you'll hang me if I hunt anywhere but the ruins, and you'll hang me for poaching if I don't hunt in the ruins. That about the shape of it?"

Lord Viorno smiled. "I will expect your regular patrols of Eldernost to commence at first light."

Chapter 3

Thorn's companions were not amused.

"You can't even find a wight in the ruins," Mara said. "And even if you could, you can't get it to stand still long enough to bleed it."

"We got a wizard for that," said Thorn. He told them about Quinix. Mara snorted and Blind Tom just shook his head, as if he were saddened by the whole sorry affair. He tossed a bone from the table and it vanished into the mastiff's drooping, slavering jowls.

"If he was a wizard, he could conjure the wights and we wouldn't have to go looking for them," said Big Odd. It was a more logical thought than he usually had to offer.

"Ain't no wizards like that anymore," said Blind Tom, "not in hundreds of years."

"Well, I guess he doesn't have to conjure them, he just has to find them," Thorn said.

Mara sucked on a tooth and then worked the point of a knife around it. Her table manners weren't the most ladylike, but Thorn found himself staring anyway. Out in the Greenwell, she collected as much dirt and stink as any of them, but she cleaned up a lot better. With hair the color of copper, fierce blue eyes and a figure to tighten your trousers, she was a good-looking woman, and no mistake. If you could ever get her into a dress and teach her not to pick her teeth, she might be beautiful.

Of course, if she did all that she wouldn't make time with the likes of him.

Mara caught him looking at her and scowled. She slammed the knife point-down into the table. "We wouldn't be the first ones the Gray sent into the ruins. You remember a few months back, Viorno sent a full company into the city after the wight they call Redmourn. The company never came back, but they say Redmourn's still in there."

"Three days after Viorno sent in his soldiers," said Blind Tom, "Redmourn hit a caravan bringing supplies from Trevi. Fed on the teamsters and burned the wagons."

"The oxen, too," said Big Odd.

Thorn looked at him. "The oxen, what?"

"They say he drained them, too." He looked thoughtful. "How much blood is in an ox? More than a man, I'll bet, more than two or three."

"Depends on the man," said Blind Tom. "You might have an ox's worth of blood in you." Big Odd winced.

"I'm sure he had help," Thorn muttered. "If he drank it all himself he would have popped."

"I don't like it," said Mara. "The *ruins*? I'd rather kill three wights at once in the deep wood than go hunting for one in the city. Less work for the same pay."

A better chance of returning from the Greenwell, too. "Not the same pay.

Viorno is putting up a mark a month and we're expected to be on patrol six days a week. No bounties on the wights we kill. But I ain't sure how much choice we got, seeing how he also banned us from hunting in the wood. And he hinted he might like to hang us for poaching. Hang me, anyway."

"Bloody buggers and bastards," Mara spat. "Even at the edge of the bleeding world, the bloody Grays are always there to give you a crooked turn."

"The Gray can't stretch a neck that's a hundred miles away," said Big Odd.

Blind Tom nodded. "Might be we've worn out our welcome, Caleb. We could follow the edge of the forest north, see if the Andermen need someone to kill their wights. We could find a ship sailing for Amura and do the same. I always wanted to see the South."

"Bugger the Gray, Caleb," Mara said. "If he wants a milk nurse for his scavs he can bloody well suckle them himself."

"The bounties are good, here," Thorn said. "At least they were. Back in the world, folks are starving in the fields, all except for the Grays. There's talk of another war between Krace and Anderland, with both sides just waiting to see which way Castien goes. We've had it good here. Life could get pretty hard if we leave." When it did, they'd be looking to him for their next meal. Their eagerness to make a change would be long forgotten.

"Harder than hunting the ruins?" said Mara. "I don't see it. If there's to be war in the north, we'll go south, like Blind Tom said."

"We'd never be able to come back. We'd be fugitives."

"Fugitives, where? Between here and Trevi, maybe. Beyond that, you won't find many who've ever heard of Lord Viorno and even fewer that care." Mara looked at him, her eyes imploring. "The world is wide, Caleb. I'd like to see a piece of it."

Blind Tom sighed. "Hunting wights in the Greenwell ain't a great way to live, but at least a man is free. Take that away and there's easier ways to live."

Big Odd nodded. "Easier ways to die."

Thorn looked up from his cup to see a scav approaching their table. Unlike Lord Viorno, a man who might have been a hundred but looked forty, the scav was probably forty and looked a hundred. Most of his hair had fallen out, but what remained was a dull gray produced by hard life and a never-ending supply of stone dust. Deep crags lined his face and savage wrinkles crisscrossed his neck and throat like scars from the lash. He held a greasy woolen hat and twisted it nervously in his hands. "Beggin' your pardons, masters…and, uh, m'lady."

Thorn saw Mara's body tense up and her face flush red. He knew she didn't much care to be called a lady, most likely because she didn't think she was one. He didn't want to see the old scav take a public beating from an angry woman. "What do you want?" he said. "This is a private meeting."

The scav bobbed his head. "It's just, my friends and I couldn't help

overhearing what you were deliberatin' on." He gestured behind him to the table he'd come from, but Thorn noticed the other scavs' attention was on everything but the bounty-hunters. "The name's Jem, and I'm a scavenger—we all are—as I guess you probably know. The thing is, we'd be eager to offer a bounty on any wights you take in the ruins. We can't offer a whole mark like the lord does…er, did, I reckon…but we could give you a quint for a set o' teeth. We were thinking that, plus whatever the Gray is giving, might make it worth your while."

Thorn nodded and looked around the table. "That's a fair offer, friend," he said. His crew didn't seem as enthusiastic about it, but they didn't have the sense for business he did.

"There was some old boys in Sacerta when I was a younger man, made a living selling protection," said Blind Tom. "You looking to move into a field less reputable than bounty-hunting, I reckon you could pick worse."

"We wouldn't be forcing them to take our protection, nor threatening to do violence to them if they didn't," Thorn said. "It ain't hardly the same thing. They're asking for our help."

Mara sneered. "I can shit a quint if Old Nook puts too much spice in my food."

"In Sacerta, they paid them old boys more than that not to beat their wives or burn their shops down," said Blind Tom.

"Better to live in poverty than to die with an extra quint in your pocket," said Big Odd.

Thorn nodded once and then shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Jem. I understand you want to keep the wights off you, but we just ain't the ones to do it."

The scav looked to his table and back at Thorn. He swallowed hard. "We could go as high as three quints for a wight," he said.

Thorn stood and stretched out his hand. "At three quints for the bounty," he said, smiling, "we're just the ones you've been waiting for."

Chapter 4

The Greenwell divided the world, separating the lands ruled by men from the lands they did not, the known from the unknown. So far as Thorn knew, the great wood had always been there, keeping its secrets as the fortunes and borders of men and nations shifted around it. In ancient times, the impenetrable green had been the only frontier the Old Empire could not conquer. Men said an ancient race had once made the wood their home. They had built the great city of Eldernost, the stone roads, and all the other towers and shrines and markers scattered through the westernmost fringes of the Greenwell. Men said these ancients were masters of magic, for precious traces of it remained behind, like ghosts in the ruins.

The ruins and the remnant magic were all that was left to remind the world the ancient race had ever existed. Thorn was pretty sure he knew what had happened to them. If you found a forest infested with wolves, no need to wonder where all the deer went. The wights had hunted the ancients to extinction, and now they hunted men.

Eldernost sprawled across both banks of the Horngren River, both above and below the great falls where the water tumbled over jagged rock and threw up a white spray and dull roar that never subsided. The lower city, on the west bank, was where most of the scavengers worked, digging, scraping and hammering, searching desperately for some trace of magic that might buy them a real life. The upper city at the top of the falls was dominated by the crumbling remains of a great castle. The imposing structure rose from a rugged island that split the river before it cascaded down to the easier terrain below. Ancient stone stairs carved into the hillside flanked the falls to either side and joined the upper and lower city.

Thorn stood on a low ridge and looked out over the ruins. The city sloped away from him, down toward the river, and the water was a silver ribbon winding through the maze of green-choked, crumbling stone. The bright sun was just peeking over the forest canopy, bathing the ruins in golden light. Thorn imagined how the city must have looked when it was alive, in ages past. From what he could tell, the buildings had been bigger and fancier along the river, and picked up more of both as they drew closer to the falls and the twin stairs that climbed to the upper city. The builders had favored the river and wanted to be close to it. In a city built by men, it would have had a rundown river port or a reeking fish market clogging its banks.

Three massive stone bridges spanned the river as it wound through the city, though the one nearest the falls had been sundered long ago. The stonework reached across the water from either bank, but there was a ragged gap in the center where the two spans would once have joined. Huge blocks were exposed above the surface of the river below, the pale stone almost hidden entirely by a green blanket of moss.

Thorn sighed. The day was of a kind that might ordinarily lift a man's

spirits, but the dead city was impervious to its charms. No matter how cheerful the weather, the story the ruins told was always the same: Everything dies.

The crew made their camp on a broad stone foundation flanked by cracked pillars that leaned this way and that like drunken soldiers in their ranks. Most of the scavs did their digging near the edge of the ruins, and the elevated slab gave Thorn the best view of his wards he was likely to find. "Go on ahead and lay down a hexing circle," he said to Blind Tom. "Might be it won't do us any good in the ruins, but we don't know that for a fact. Best take what precautions we can."

The fat wizard struggled out of his pack and collapsed onto the stone, wheezing and sweating. He was wearing the heavy black robes of a Magister, and Thorn couldn't think of an outfit any more foolish for the heat of the day. Once Quinix stopped heaving like a bellows, he dug around in his pack and drew out a flat ring of hammered iron, about the breadth of a man's hand. He smiled and offered it to Thorn.

"What's this, then?"

"It's a torq," said Quinix. He pulled out more of the rings and passed them around. "You wear it around your neck—see, you can pull it apart like so." The wizard demonstrated, pulling apart the ends of the torq and slipping it around his neck. "It's for protection. The wights don't like iron."

"That's a fact," said Thorn. He put on the torq and rolled his shoulders to get the feel of it. The iron rasped against the heavy scar tissue that stippled the flesh of his neck and throat. "This was a fine idea. Wish someone on my crew had thought of it."

"Hmph," said Blind Tom. He fastened his torq around the mastiff's neck.

Big Odd put on the torq and ran his fingers around the edge. "I feel better with a bit o' iron between a wight's teeth and my throat."

"It ain't much to look at," said Mara, "but I guess we're not planning to present ourselves at court."

Thorn wasn't about to mention it, but he rather fancied the look of the iron torq. It struck him as something the Andermen might have worn when they came howling out of the North, burning the Old Empire to its foundations and raising a kingdom from the ashes.

"What else you got in that bag, wizard?" he asked, craning his neck to see if he could get a look.

"Quinix," said the wizard. He smiled nervously and dove into his pack once more, finally revealing a round wooden plate with a smooth stone anchored in the center by a brass pin. Along with the plate, Quinix removed a small leather pouch. He loosened the drawstrings and poured a number of small iron balls into the palm of his hand. Thorn could see runes engraved in the surface of the balls. They reminded him of the runes carved into Blind Tom's hexing stones, but he couldn't decipher their meaning.

"We are the stone in the center," Quinix said, pointing. "The balls

represent the wights. Observe."

Quinix dropped the iron balls onto the surface of the wooden plate, and they began to spin around the circumference of their own accord. Around and around they spun until one by one they rolled off the edge of the plate and dropped into the wizard's hand—all but one of them, which wobbled and then rooted in place, above and to the right of the center stone.

"Hmph," Blind Tom said, and turned his attention to picking burrs out of the mastiff's coat.

"Well, that's something," Thorn said, scratching his chin. "But what's the point?"

"The range is only about a hundred yards," Quinix said. He looked at the wooden plate and then turned, pointing in the direction indicated by the ball. "The scrying tablet is telling us there's a wight about…seventy yards that way. No other wights are within the device's range."

Mara shook her head. "How does it know where the wight is? If it's just your wizardry at work, why do you need the contraption?"

"My wizardry and more," Quinix said. He held up one of the iron balls. "This little ball has been infused with magic—enough to buy a nice house, I should think. Imagine the tablet is the center of a spiderweb. It casts out invisible strands in all directions—up to a hundred yards, as I said. If a wight falls into our web…well, it won't be trapped, as a fly would, but we'll know exactly where it is and where it goes." He tossed the iron ball into the air and let it fall into the palm of his hand. "The magic I have put into the scrying tablet allows us to create this invisible web. With it, we can locate and track the wights' movements."

Mara made a warding sign and scooted over to help Blind Tom with the dog. Thorn held out his hand. "Can I try?"

The look that passed over Quinix's face seemed rather possessive to Thorn, but then the wizard shrugged and dropped the iron balls into his hand. Thorn placed them carefully on the wooden plate and watched them spin round and round until only one remained, affixed in the same position as before.

"I'll be damned," he said. In truth, he *was* fascinated by the magical device, but he'd also gained some potentially valuable information. Whatever magic was at work, it was in the device and not in the wizard. He needed the scrying tablet. He didn't necessarily need Quinix.

While Thorn tinkered with the device, Quinix went over and sat near the others. He reached out a hand to scratch the mastiff's ears, but the rumbling growl from deep in the dog's massive chest made him think better of it.

"What's his name?" he asked instead.

Blind Tom shrugged. "Being a dog, he don't notice the lack of one very often. He answers to bacon or rabbit. You find yourself needin' to discuss something with him, you might try one of them."

Quinix nodded and shifted his ample weight on the stone slab. "I

understand you're a wizard."

Blind Tom snorted. "I know some tricks. Don't call myself a wizard, and don't need no one else doing it neither."

"They say your hexing circles render wights powerless so they can be killed."

"They sound like idiots," Blind Tom said. "Only thing a circle does is let you set up an ambush. Without it, a wight'll have a better idea where you are than you do."

"The whispering wood."

Blind Tom shrugged. "Maybe the trees talk to them. Maybe the earth or the bloody birds of the air. All I know is what works. Guess I'll leave the 'why' of it to wizards."

Quinix nodded enthusiastically. "It's always best to maintain a pragmatic attitude towards magic," he said. "What good is lore if it doesn't permit one to accomplish some productive task?"

"Well, so far I ain't seen nothin' but some pig iron and a fancy plate that don't do anything my dog's nose can't do just as well. Unless you got a wand in there can turn a wight into a toad, I don't see we're any better off than we were afore."

Quinix didn't seem to take offense. He reached back in his pack and pulled out a small vial filled about halfway to the top with a milky liquid. Thorn saw golden, glowing motes of light suspended in the substance. "I can infuse your hexing stones with this," the wizard said.

"No one touches my hexing stones but me," said Blind Tom, in a voice that made it clear he didn't intend the discussion to last very long.

"But I can improve on them!" said Quinix. "This is magic! Whatever the stones do—and I should point out, you don't even *know*—they'll be far more potent!"

"They don't need improving," said Blind Tom. "I got 'em from my father, he got 'em from his father, and all the way back to the day the world was born. I guess they worked just fine through all those years without you rubbing that spunk on them."

Quinix looked at the bottle and shook it. "It's not spunk." he said. "It's magic!"

"How do you even know it looks like spunk?" Thorn had often been suspicious of the extent of Blind Tom's blindness.

"I ain't always been blind, and I know what it looks like. Don't need any of it on my stones."

Mara and Big Odd snickered. Thorn turned to Quinix. "If that is what you say it is, it's got to be worth a fortune. Viorno could have traded it for an army of mercenaries to kill wights for him."

A guilty flush colored Quinix's chubby cheeks. "It's not pure," he said. "It has some elemental impurities—which is what produces its cloudy appearance, I might add." Here he paused to scowl at Blind Tom, who didn't

seem to notice. “The impurities are mostly principle of earth, which, indeed, will aid in the infusion of the hexing stones.”

“What will it do?” asked Mara.

“Well, who knows?” said Quinix. “We don’t even know what the stones do now, or even, I should say, if they do anything at all.”

Thorn wasn’t inclined to let Quinix change the subject. “Even if it ain’t pure, it still must be worth a small fortune. Where’d you get it?”

Quinix cupped the vial protectively in his hands and frowned. “Lord Viorno has many scavs in his service,” he said. “When they return from the ruins with a find, it is delivered to the alchemist called Scorza. We are…I would not say ‘friends,’ but acquaintances. Scorza extracts the magic and delivers the finished product to Viorno.”

“You’re skimming,” said Thorn, and laughed.

“I’m saving for the future!” Quinix retorted. “Scorza and I have an agreement, you might say. With each extraction, we keep a little for ourselves. Not enough that Lord Viorno would ever notice. We’re hurting no one.”

Thorn shrugged. “I wasn’t planning to hand you over to the Gray. What you’re saying is that this is your treasure, acquired at some risk to yourself, and you’re willing to use it if it will help us. Ain’t that something, Blind Tom?”

“I already laid out my circle.”

“I guess we’ll be back tomorrow, and the day after. We could let Quinix see what he can do with the stones before you put ‘em down again.”

Blind Tom shrugged.

Thorn sat down by Quinix and clamped a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry about old Tom,” he said. “He’s spent so much time with that dog, they more or less got the same manners. We appreciate what you brought, and we’ll put it to use.”

“Hmph,” said Blind Tom, and plucked another burr from the mastiff’s hide.

Chapter 5

When the sun dropped behind the trees, the crew packed up and followed the scavs out of the ruins. Other than the narrowly averted row between Quinix and Blind Tom, they hadn't done much except spin the iron on the scrying tablet to see if any wights came close enough to kill. They hadn't, in Thorn's judgment, so there'd been plenty of time to enjoy the sunshine and get used to being in the ruins. When they got back to the town, they made straightaway for the Duck and Quinix came with them.

Thorn sat at one end of their table with the wizard across from him. The scavs who'd retained their services were in the same place as well. The expressions on their faces didn't seem too happy.

"Our patrons are giving us the stink eye," said Thorn.

Quinix leaned over, his belly spilling over the surface of the old table. "Perhaps we showed insufficient industry to meet their expectations."

"If you mean they think we're lazy, I expect you're right. Still, I guess they all came back with their blood where it's supposed to be, and it didn't even cost them anything."

Quinix fidgeted with his cup. "Do you think there will be fighting tomorrow?"

"With any luck," said Thorn. "I guess we need to start killing wights if we expect to get paid."

"Have you been in a lot of fights?"

"More than I'd like." He looked up and squinted at the wizard. "I guess you haven't done a lot of it yourself."

Quinix shook his head. "Never…not since I was a young lad, anyway, and I wasn't any good at it even then."

"Well, you've never been in a real fight, then. The scuffles you were in as a boy, they don't count for anything seeing how you always had a choice about it. Anyone right in the head, he has a choice he'll choose not to fight. Easier to walk away or even take a beating than it is to fight."

"I'll bet you weren't right in the head, when you were a boy."

Thorn snorted. "No, I never was right in the head. But you'll find a fight to the death is another matter. Choice ain't got nothing to do with it. When someone's trying to kill you, even if it's a wight, you do what you got to do without even thinking about it."

"I'm afraid."

Thorn nodded. "Your fear don't go away. Everything else does, until your fear's all that's left. You're so damned scared you might piss yourself. You're so damned scared you can't think, and that's usually a good thing. Your fear is the part of you that wants to survive and you'll be real surprised what it'll do when you let it."

"How long have you been hunting wights?"

"Long enough, and then a while longer. More than five years, with this

crew. Not all of it in Eldernost—we worked the timber camps before."

"Were you a soldier?"

"A long time ago. But I don't believe they've changed the rules since then."

Quinix was quiet for a while. Finally, he whispered, "Are you and Mara…"

Thorn looked up at the wizard, then over to where Mara was sawing a chicken leg with her knife. "No, we ain't. We hunt together, so there ain't much room for anything else." *Not to mention, she'd probably rather kiss a wight than a scarred, used-up old killer like me.*

"She's beautiful," Quinix said. His voice was low, but Thorn saw his eyes light up. "I don't understand why she does this—hunts wights, I mean."

"Well, she ain't no princess," Thorn said. "If she wasn't doing this, I guess she'd be tilling a field somewhere, or having babies for some dirt-poor farmer or one of them scavs going into the ruins to die."

"How did you meet her?" Quinix said. "I mean, how did she come to hunt wights with you?"

The first time Thorn had seen Mara, there'd been a wight lying on top of her, holding her down while it worked at her throat. He'd been tracking the wight for days. It had stopped long enough in Mara's village for him to catch up. By the time he got there, her husband was already dead. So was her daughter, though the wight hadn't done it. The child was stabbed through the heart and there was a bloody knife lying a few feet from Mara's outstretched hand.

He'd killed the wight and Mara had joined his crew. He hadn't asked her to, and she hadn't asked his permission to come with him. Since that night, she spoke a number every time they took a wight: one kill for every year of life her daughter never had. There was no way of knowing how long her daughter would have lived, and sometimes Thorn was sure she'd lost the count of the wights they'd killed. It didn't seem to matter.

He shook his head. "Ain't my place to say. Everyone who does what we do has a story, but you'll have to ask her if it's a tale you want to hear."

"You might stop asking questions that ain't none of your business." Mara pointed her knife at the wizard and eyed him along the blade. "You keep flapping your lips, maybe I'll shave 'em for you."

Quinix looked like he'd been accused of high treason. "I didn't mean to… I just wanted to…" Mara ignored him and attacked her dinner with the knife.

Thorn grinned. "You might want to let her tell the story without asking about it."

"So why do *you* hunt wights, Master Thorn?"

Thorn smoked his pipe and didn't answer for a while. Finally, he said, "I guess if you get started in the killing business early enough in life, you never really learn how to do anything else."

"But why did you start? Is it like Mara? Did the wights kill your wife or

something?"

"No, I kill wights because I get a gold mark for a set of teeth. At least I used to. I'd never seen a wight when my wife died."

"You were married, then?"

"I was, and I had a son, too. My story ain't as good as Mara's. It's nothing you haven't heard before."

"I'd like to, though," Quinix said, smiling uncertainly. "If you want to tell it, that is."

The first memory that always came to him was the blood. It sat there at the top of his mind like a fly floating in a bowl of milk and refused to be pushed back into the darkness. There was so much blood the air was thick with the smell, but his wife wasn't lying on a battlefield. It was the straw mattress in the house he'd built with his own hands out of mud brick and thatch. Her skin was pale as ghost-flesh and there were dark circles under her eyes, like bruises inflicted by some violence he couldn't see. "She's passing," the wise woman told him. "The spirits have her now. Use well the time they give you." The babe cradled in his wife's arms was a joy so intense it flared white-hot in Thorn's chest. And he was losing his love, and his joy warred with anguish, despair and rage, and threatened to tear him in two. His wife smiled at the babe, and smiled at him, and they said their words. And then she was gone.

For three years after that, the boy had been his life. He fed his son, and cleaned him, and kept him safe. He told him stories about the mother he'd never known. The boy had his mother's hair and eyes, and every day it broke Thorn's heart to look at him. And then one night he got a fever. Thorn held him in his arms and rocked him. He pressed a rag soaked in cool water against the boy's forehead, and rubbed the poultice the wise woman had given him on his son's chest. At some point during the night, he'd fallen asleep. When he awoke, the boy was dead. Thorn was alone in the house he had built without even ghosts to haunt him.

"I had a wife and a boy," said Thorn. "They died."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Master Thorn. I really am."

Thorn shrugged. "I guess you can call me Caleb or Thorn, as it suits you. Anyway, like I said, it's nothing you can't hear in any corner of the known world. The wights didn't do it. My wife and my boy—they just died. Truth is, life is cheap, unless you're a Gray and you can afford to make it dear. The world don't miss my wife or my boy, nor even notice they're gone."

"Is that when you became a soldier?"

Thorn nodded once. "At least when you kill a man—or a wight, for that matter—you can say why he's dead. It's no mystery when you put your steel in a man's gut and watch the light go out in his eyes. You can give it a reason." Thorn tapped out the bowl on the floor and tucked his pipe away in shirt. He closed his eyes and drained his cup, slamming it on the table in hopes the noise might attract a serving girl. "What about you? How'd you get

into the wizarding business?"

"I had four older brothers and no other prospects, so my father gave me to the Schoolmen. A man who means to be a Gray doesn't need five sons to begin with—he doesn't expect to require an heir, you see? A son with no prospects is a terrible expense." Quinix smoothed his robes nervously and shifted his bulk on the bench. "A Magister in the family still brings some status, though. I suppose it worked out for everyone."

"Were you in Cicosia, then?"

Quinix laughed. "By the winds, no! It would have cost my father a great deal of money to place me at the University, and that was the exact opposite of his intentions. I studied at the College in Pavaria. That didn't cost my father anything, and the Schoolmen there were happy enough to have me. They're sponsored by the Duke, but their funding might be diminished if they found themselves without students."

Mara slid down the bench next to Quinix. "So then you went to work for Viorno?"

The wizard looked surprised and somewhat uncomfortable about the attention. "Sadly, you, uh, do me too great an honor, my la—Mara," Quinix said, stammering. "No, once out of College with my Magister's signet," he flashed the large, gold ring at them, "I was approached by the Leone family in Trevi. They are deeply involved in the alchemical trade, as you may know, and I assumed it was in that field they wished to retain some expertise. Instead, I discovered they wanted me to concoct poisons to do away with their commercial rivals."

"Bloody Grays," Mara spat.

"Indeed. So, then, when Lord Viorno was given title to Eldernost, I showed up at his door and offered my services. I knew he did not have a wizard currently in his employ and that he would shortly have need of one." Quinix chuckled. "I confess, if I'd actually known what to expect I might still be brewing poisons."

Thorn and Mara laughed. There was even a sound that might have indicated merriment from Blind Tom, though he showed no other sign of having been distracted from his cup.

"Anyway," said Quinix quietly, "I didn't learn anything of fighting in the College. But I will try not to let you down."

"Being honest," said Mara, "except for Caleb and Odd, and maybe the dog, there ain't a lot of what you'd call fighting. You can be sure no one ever taught me how to fight, unless you count twisting a rooster's neck. What we do is just killing. It's a job for a butcher, not a soldier. We get a wight in the net and then we bleed it. A fair fight's nothing to do with it."

At the other end of the table, Big Odd lifted his cup in a toast. "May our lives be free of sorrow," he said, and winked, "and may the wight never escape the net."

Chapter 6

The next day, on their first real patrol in the ruins, a wight escaped the net. They were patrolling near the edge of the city where a hundred or more scavs were working strung out along a wide boulevard lined with crumbling statues. The street ran from a plaza with a ruined fountain in its center half a mile to a shattered arch that must once have served as a minor portal into the city.

The mastiff was trotting twenty feet out in front of the group when he suddenly froze, every muscle in his huge body tensing, and his black nose lifted into the wind.

"I'll check the scrying tablet," said Quinix, shrugging out of his pack.

"Don't think there's time for that, just now," said Thorn. He saw a blur of movement, a flash of white skin and brightly colored body paint, and one of the scavs screamed. The wight was about fifty feet ahead of the crew, one hand gripping the scav woman's throat, lifting her off her feet. The mastiff let out a low growl, and the wight turned towards them. It dropped the woman in the dust, crouched, and bared its fangs. Before they could act, it grabbed the woman by the hair and dragged her kicking and screaming into a darkened doorway.

"Heel the dog," Thorn said, and then he broke into a trot, moving quickly and quietly to the building. The rest of the crew came up behind him. He put his back against the wall and ducked his head inside. A long hallway stretched away from him, with doorways to either side. The dust was thick on the floor and their footfalls cast it up in billowing, choking clouds.

Thorn cursed under his breath. "Torches."

"The wight ain't got a torch," said Mara. "It'll know we're coming."

"I guess we lost the element of surprise," Thorn said, "but I can't see in the dark. Unless you can, I suggest you light a damn torch." He turned to Blind Tom. "You and the dog stay here. I don't want anything coming in behind us." Blind Tom nodded.

They entered in single file, Thorn, Quinix, Mara and then Big Odd. Thorn paused just inside the doorway and studied the floor, but he didn't need to study for long. There was a clear trail where the wight dragged the woman through the dust. The trail led down the hallway and disappeared beyond the edge of his torchlight.

They drew their weapons and followed the trail down the hallway and around a corner into a small, windowless room with stone stairs descending into the darkness. Thorn extended his torch and saw a bloody handprint on the wall, then a long, wet, red smear trailing down. The breath hissed out of his lungs. The scav was fighting; Thorn had to give her that.

Quinix drew up close to him and peered over his shoulder. "They say there are basements and subbasements and great halls and galleries down there," he whispered. "A whole city under the city."

"Then I guess we better move before the wight gets too far." Thorn

descended slowly and as quietly as he could down the stairs to a landing, where the stairs turned to the left before continuing. He paused on the landing and listened. What he heard sounded a lot like the mastiff working on a rabbit he'd caught in the wood. He turned and whispered to Mara. "Ready the net. It's feeding."

Thorn waited a few moments while Mara freed the net from her pack. He could hear Quinix breathing, quick and fast, just behind him. When Mara was ready, Thorn tested his grip on the hilt of his sword and continued down the last few steps, leading with the torch.

The underground chamber had a low ceiling and Thorn had to hunch down to keep from banging his head against the stone. The wight was in the far corner, holding the scav woman's body in its arms, its face buried in her throat. Thorn moved away from the stairs, keeping his back against the wall. *Give Mara room to work with the net.*

The wight looked up and locked eyes with Thorn, and it hissed at him. Blood covered its cheeks and its chin and dripped from its lips. The wight was female. She was uncovered from the waist up and he could see the small tits, the nipples painted in bright green swirls. He frowned. Something was wrong; it was right there in front of him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. *You're watching a wight feeding on a woman. Maybe that's what feels off.*

Mara moved into the room and cast the net. The wight dropped her victim and tried to dart aside, but the net settled over her head and one side of her body. She tumbled to the floor, shrieking in a high keening voice that set Thorn's teeth on edge and reverberated in the small chamber.

No time for thinking. Thorn moved forward, thrusting the torch at the wight's face, maneuvering into position to finish her with his sword. Mara was silent, but he could feel her presence just behind him and to his left. Absurdly, Thorn's attention was drawn back to the wight's breasts. Something nagged at him. *What are you missing?*

It dawned on him in an instant. He'd only caught a fleeting glimpse, but the wight he'd seen take the woman had been male. And it wasn't wearing green body paint. "There's another—" he yelled, and then Mara grunted in pain and surprise.

He turned and saw her slump to the floor against the wall. There was a flash of white and the dull glint bronze, and then the male wight was on him. It barreled into him, impossibly fast, and slammed him against the wall. Thorn's head snapped back and cracked into the stone, and his vision blurred. He thrust blindly with the torch and heard flesh sizzle, and his nostrils filled with the stench of burning hair. The wight made a sound like metal screeching on metal. A line of fire traced across Thorn's ribs. He saw the wight's blade and his own blood on it.

Thorn raised his sword and brought it down in a vicious strike at the wight's neck, but he was too close, off balance, and the wight was too fast and too strong. It slapped his sword arm aside and the blade sparked as it clattered

on stone. The wight thrust with its knife and Thorn grabbed its arm, pulling the creature in even closer. Now they were both off balance and they stumbled and went down. The wight rolled on top of Thorn and slammed the knife down at his chest. Thorn caught the wight's wrists and only then realized he'd dropped his sword.

The wight's inhuman strength and most of its weight pressed down on the blade, and Thorn strained against it. The tip bit into the flesh of Thorn's throat and he felt blood trickle down his neck. The wight grinned savagely, showing its fangs, and licked its lips. Then Thorn saw a figure rise up behind the wight, a dagger of its own gripped in one fist and lifted over its head. Quinix's eyes were wide and his hands were shaking, but he slammed the dagger into the back of the wight's neck. The blade burst point-first from the creature's throat and sprayed blood over Thorn's face. More of the dark fluid gurgled from its mouth, and the wight teetered and collapsed in a heap, Quinix's dagger still buried to the hilt in its neck.

"I killed it," Quinix said, his voice quavering. He started to lean down to retrieve his blade, then thought better of it and wiped his hands on his robes.

Thorn groaned and spat blood from his mouth. Some of it was the wight's, but most of it was his own. *Must have bitten my tongue*. The back of his head was pounding and the cut along his ribs blazed with pain every time he drew breath. Thorn was still on the dusty floor feeling around for his sword when the second wight leaped on Quinix's back and sunk her teeth into his neck.

The wizard fell to his knees, his eyes bugging out. His mouth gaped and a choking, strangled sound came out. The wight drew back from the wizard's neck, blood on her face, hissing at the iron torq. Big Odd loomed in the dim light, hunched over nearly half in the close space, and the tip of his spear burst from the front of the wight's chest. She screamed and clawed at the thick shaft.

Thorn still couldn't find his sword. Only after wasting precious seconds did he remember the knife at his belt. He jerked it out and advanced on the wight, but she saw him coming. She tore herself off Big Odd's spear, blood gushing in a thick fountain from the wound, and reached for her bronze knife.

Mara's sword sliced into the side of the wight's neck and nearly severed her head. Blood fanned in the air and the wight's head flopped to the side, held in place by a few strands of meat and gristle. The wight toppled to the floor, her head slapping wetly against the stone.

Mara swayed on her feet, her hand pressed to the side of her head. Blood welled between her fingers. Big Odd shuffled forward, bent low, and slammed his spear into the female wight's corpse, and then the male's, just to be sure. Thorn looked over to Quinix, who lay in a crumpled heap. He went to him and rolled him over. The wizard's eyes were squeezed tightly shut and he had one hand clamped to the wound on his neck.

"Quit grabbing at it, damn you," Thorn said, pulling his hand away. Quinix flinched, but then opened one eye and allowed Thorn to inspect the

wound. Thorn sat back on his heels and shook his head. “Good thing you’re a husky fellow or she might’ve got an artery. And I reckon the iron made her think twice about staying to drink her fill. As it is, I ain’t sure she got more than a drop out of you.”

Mara sat down on the bottom step, still holding her head. Thorn went over and knelt in front of her. “Let me see,” he said softly. She folded her hands in her lap and turned her head to the side. The cut was shallow but it was bleeding profusely. “I don’t see any brains leaking out, but that could just be the patient,” Thorn said, smiling. “We need to stop that bleeding and get back to camp so Blind Tom can clean it and stitch you up.”

“It don’t make no sense to get stitched by a blind man.”

“Better a man who can sew but can’t see than a man who can see but can’t sew,” said Big Odd.

Mara scowled. “There’s another hall,” she said, her voice dry and harsh. She nodded to the other side of the room. “There could be more down here.”

“I guess there probably are, but we’re done hunting for today if it’s up to me. Odd, you get up those stairs and stand a lookout. You’re like a giant in a jewelry box down here as it is.” Thorn found his pack and dug out some linen bandages, and wrapped them carefully around Mara’s head. “You keep some pressure on that,” he said. “It’ll help with the bleeding, and it’ll probably hurt a little less if you hold it steady.”

Thorn stood up and went over to where the scav was lying. Her eyes stared sightlessly and her mouth hung open, showing a few yellow teeth that had survived the hard years of poverty. Blood soaked her shirt and the gaping wound in her neck was so deep and savage Thorn could see the white glint of her neck bones.

He turned to Quinix. “We just got to do one more thing, then we can get out of here.”

“The teeth?” said Quinix. His voice sounded small.

“Little more’n that, this time,” said Thorn. He walked over to the male wight, found his sword lying on the stone and picked it up. He got a firm grip on the hilt with both hands, lifted it up until the point scraped against the low ceiling and brought the blade down on the wight’s neck. He had to hack at it a couple more times before the head came free. Thorn picked it up by the hair, pulled a leather bag out of his pack and dumped the head in the bag.

“You take Mara’s sword and get the other one,” he said to Quinix. “She already did most of the work for you.”

“Why do you want the heads?” Quinix asked. Sweat was beading on his forehead and Thorn thought he looked a little green.

“You’ll see what I mean to do with them soon enough.”

Quinix looked a little shaky doing it, but he sawed at the wight’s neck until the head came loose. He placed it with the other in the bag. Thorn went over and hefted the woman in his arms. Then they all climbed the stairs and rejoined Big Odd, Blind Tom and the dog.

Outside, a large crowd of scavs had gathered. Jem, the man with the greasy woolen cap, stood at the front of them. Thorn carried the woman's body over, but their employer didn't take it. Thorn looked around and then laid the corpse in the dirt. No one came forward to claim her, and he didn't know what else to do.

Thorn gave Jem a steady look, not hard but not friendly, either. "Two wights," he said. "That's six quints."

There was an angry muttering in the crowd. "You're supposed to be protecting us," Jem said. "Now you bring us a corpse and ask for our money."

"I wasn't asking." Thorn held the man's gaze and let all the feeling drain out of his eyes—whatever might have been left, anyway. Jem swallowed hard and his face paled.

"We don't mean to cheat you," he said, clearing his throat. "It's just a hard thing losing one of our own and still having to pay the bounty."

"You agreed to pay for dead wights. There's two down there. That's two wights won't be coming for any of you. And it's six quints for me and my crew." Thorn titled his head and squinted a little. "I got to tell you, Jem, I don't like having to ask for what's coming to me."

Jem bobbed his head, and then went around collecting the bounty in his cap. Thorn took the quints and tucked them in the leather pouch at his belt. He gave the scav a long, last look and then turned away, leading his crew back down the boulevard.

On their way back to camp, Thorn drove wooden stakes into the earth near the scavs' largest worksite, and then he mounted the wights' heads on the stakes.

Chapter 7

By the following afternoon, the spiked heads were already attracting flies. The plump black-and-green insects buzzed around, crawling in and out of nostrils, mouths and ears, and massing around the severed stumps.

Mara eyed the heads dubiously. "It lacks charm, but at least it's stupid."

"Why's it stupid?"

"You poke a hornet's nest, I guess you know what happens next. You might have your reasons, but you're still gonna get stung."

"I'm sending a message."

"What message? 'Kill me?'"

Big Odd and Quinix chuckled, and Thorn scowled at them. "We can't be everywhere at once. There are only five of us—"

"Six," said Blind Tom, "if you count the wizard."

Thorn looked at him. "I was counting the wizard, but not the dog. I stand corrected. As I was saying, we can't be everywhere a wight could be, so we got to train them to stay off the scavs."

"So we only kill a wight if it's feeding on a scav?" asked Mara.

"I didn't say that. We'll kill a wight when we see one, same as always, but we'll only stake out the heads when we catch one feeding."

"What makes you think the wights care what you do with their heads after you kill them?" said Mara. "If anything's going to get them riled up, I guess the killing will."

"In that case," Thorn said, lifting an eyebrow, "we ain't poking the hornet's nest and there's nothing stupid about staking out the heads."

Mara opened her mouth to argue and then slammed it shut so hard her teeth clacked. She wheeled around and stormed off back to the camp.

"The message does seem mixed," said Big Odd, waving the tip of his spear at one of the heads to shoo the flies.

"Do you really think the heads will convince the wights to stop feeding on the scavs?" asked Quinix.

Thorn shrugged. "I don't think they'll learn by dinner time, if that's what you mean. But I do know we're never getting out of these ruins unless we figure out how to keep the wights off the scavs. Seeing how I don't speak Wight, I'm looking for other ways to communicate. Thus, these here heads on spikes. If you got any better notion how to train a wight, I'd love to hear one. Otherwise, maybe you could all shut your damn holes about the bloody heads."

Thorn glared at each of them in turn, and no one had anything to say. "All right, let's go fetch Mara and have a look around. Maybe we can find a wight to kill, give you all something to do besides criticize."

They walked down the line of men and women working the stone, the scavs too craven or too smart to wander far from the herd. They were scraping the same rock a thousand scavs had worked a thousand times. Still, Thorn

guessed it was easier to nurse your dreams of riches without a wight chewing on your neck.

Thorn spotted Jem up ahead standing with his cap in his hand and staring down at his dusty boots. As the crew approached, a bravo slammed his gloved fist into Jem's face and the scav went sprawling in the dirt. The man stepped forward and kicked the scav hard in the ribs. "You holding out on me, Jem?" the bravo said. "A quint a week, that's all I ask. It could be more, but I'm not a greedy man. You expect me to believe your pockets are empty? You expect me to care?"

The bravo had the busy hands and jittery voice cowards always got when they bullied the weak. Excited, having a good time, but still scared deep down. Thorn stopped a few paces away and let his hand fall to the hilt of his sword. "Swing your leg at that man again," he said, "and I'll have it off at the knee."

The bravo's head popped up, the surprise evident on his face. When he saw Thorn standing there, some of the orneriness went out of him. Not all of it, though. "Bugger yourself, scav. This business ain't got nothin' to do with you."

Thorn walked up to the man and got between him and Jem, so close their noses were almost touching. "I ain't a scav," he said, "and that one you were beating is my employer. Maybe the way you see it, you're just stealing from him. The way I see it, you're stealing from me."

The bravo smiled and took a step back. He looked at the three other toughs who stood behind him, and he looked around at the gathered scavs. "All right, then," he said, and reached down to offer Jem a hand up. "We're all just trying to do some commerce, and fighting ain't no good for it." The bravo dusted off Jem's jacket and patted him on the chest.

"I see you here again, I'm going to hurt you, boy," Thorn said. "I won't make an effort to talk it through first." He nodded and turned to walk back to his crew. He saw Quinix's eyes get big and round, but it wasn't like he needed the warning. He knew the bravo would come after him as soon as he turned his back.

Thorn wheeled and caught the bravo's wrist as he brought his dagger down in an overhand strike. Thorn twisted and felt the tendons stretch and pop under his fingers. The bravo dropped the knife and opened his mouth to let out a howl, and Thorn's fist smashed into his jaw. The man's mouth snapped shut, and some broken teeth and a bloody sliver of tongue went spinning into the dirt. The bravo fell to his knees, and Thorn kicked him in the face.

Thorn straddled him and slammed his fist into the bravo's nose. One of the other toughs started to step forward, reaching for the sword at his belt. Thorn paused, his bloody fist drawn back, and gave the man a hard look. He froze in his tracks and let his hand fall away from the hilt of his sword. Thorn nodded and punched the fallen bravo in the face again.

There was no shortage of brigands and thugs in Eldernost. They followed

the smell of gold but were too lazy and too mean to work for it themselves. It was easier to take it from the weak. Thorn figured the bravo wasn't so different from the Grays, except he didn't have a noble title or tax collectors or soldiers to do his stealing for him. If he was honest about it, Thorn had to admit there wasn't a great distance between the bravo and himself. He'd followed the smell of gold, too, but at least he offered something in return for what he took.

"Caleb," Mara said softly. Thorn looked up to see her standing over him. Only then did he realize he was still beating the man. The bravo's face was an unrecognizable mask of blood and broken bones and torn flesh. Thorn stood up, opening and closing his hand to work out the pain. He looked around at the horrified faces of the scavs. He saw fear and resentment and even hatred—but mostly fear. That was good. He looked down at the unconscious bravo and nodded. "Well," he said, "I guess he couldn't wait 'til the next time."

Jem stepped forward, wringing his woolen cap in his hands. "Thank you, Master Thorn," he said, though Thorn couldn't say the scav looked all that pleased. "They're always coming around, trying to take what ain't theirs, threatening us and our children. Do we, uh, that is, should we…what can we give you for the service?"

Thorn felt a surge of anger rise up his neck to his face. He gritted his teeth and waited for it to pass. "You pay me for killing wights, and that's it," he said. "And maybe if you learned to stand up for yourselves, you wouldn't need someone like me to do your fighting for you."

Someone came pushing through the crowd and Thorn saw Viorno's man-at-arms step into the circle of onlookers. The soldier looked down at the bravo, and then his eyes fastened on Thorn. "Who attacked this man?" he demanded. His eyes never left Thorn's.

Jem cleared his throat and spoke up. "Master Ebertus, this man tried to take—"

"Shut up," the soldier said, still staring at Thorn. Ebertus—that was his name. No wonder Thorn could never remember it. He had a sharp face and beady eyes that made him look like a rat. Or maybe it was living like a rat that did that to a man's face. You make attaching your lips to a Gray's ass your life's work, it's bound to leave its marks. "Maybe you'd like to tell me what happened?" he said to Thorn.

"Not really. You want to ask him about his day, he might be able to tell you once his jaw heals up."

Thorn saw the blow coming, but he didn't flinch away. The soldier's fist hit him on the point of his chin and moved his head sidewise a bit. He leaned over and spat blood in the dirt. "You want to break my jaw, you might need to pat me a little harder."

"I could hang you for attacking Symus."

Thorn looked from Ebertus to the bravo lying in the dirt. "Symus, is it? I'd love to hear the story about how you two came to be on a first-name basis.

Then again, might be I can guess. It doesn't seem like the scavs get much protection from Viorno's men when thugs come sniffing after some gold."

Ebertus's eyes darted nervously and he looked around at the scavs. "Not sure what you're getting at, Thorn, but you best remember who you're talking to."

"Sure, I see it," said Thorn. "You can't steal from the scavs yourself—that would be stealing from the Gray. Maybe you're not that stupid or maybe you just ain't got the stones for it, but you're not about to pick Viorno's pocket. Instead, you let unscrupulous folks like Symus here do the banditry, and you take a piece of what they get."

Ebertus's sword was halfway out of its scabbard when Thorn's hand clamped down on his wrist. "Look here," he said, trying to keep his voice low and reasonable. "You draw the rest of that iron, I'm going to kill you. Once I've done it, one of two things will happen." He raised his free hand and extended his index finger. "One, these folks will tell Lord Viorno what you been up to, and the Gray won't do anything more than shake my hand." He lifted a second finger. "Or two, the Gray will try to hang me for killing you. Maybe he will and maybe he won't. Either way, you'll be just as dead."

Ebertus didn't speak. He jerked his arm free of Thorn's grip, spat on the ground and stalked back into the crowd the way he came. Thorn wasn't sure whether the soldier was wise enough to shut his mouth, in the end, or whether he just couldn't think of anything to say.

"Ash and air, Caleb," said Mara. "You sure know how to make friends."

"Always did have a knack for it."

"I guess you gave him a score he'll be looking to settle."

"I expect he'll get his chance, if he wants it."

Mara glanced at Thorn as they made their way back to the rest of the crew. "You ain't alone, Caleb. I guess you don't care how many enemies you got. Just remember, every time you find a new one, the rest of us do, too."

Chapter 8

Over the next two weeks, the crew killed nine wights, and the wights took at least twenty scavs. Only three of the wights merited staking, but Thorn couldn't say if his message was getting across or if it was just hard to catch a wight in the act. Jem kept the other scavs in line and they paid their bounties, but the grumbling was getting louder. Thorn figured there might have been a revolt already, except the bravos weren't coming around anymore. The scavs might be dying, but at least they weren't being robbed first.

Thorn had gradually come to realize there were a lot more wights in the ruins than anyone thought, and more by the day. On a couple of occasions, he'd seen wights fighting each other, usually over a scav. Still, he might never have gotten a sense for their numbers if it hadn't been for the body paint. They were all unique and he rarely saw the same one twice.

"When I was soldiering," Thorn said, "there were a couple dreams I had every night." The crew was walking in a line down a narrow street with hollow, ruined buildings crowding in from either side. They were trailing a group of scavs who'd decided to break off from the usual work sites and push deeper into the city. Thorn heard his own words bounce off the cracked and crumbling stone.

"Tell me about them," said Quinix. He looked up at the roofs above their heads, and into the darkness of the gaping doorways and windows they passed.

"The first one, I went out to fight on the morning of a big battle and I realized I was alone. My army was gone. The enemy stood across the field and laughed at me. Then their commander called the archers. They moved forward, drew and loosed their arrows, and they turned the sky black over my head. All those shafts in flight, and all meant for me."

"That sounds terrible," Quinix muttered.

"Well, they were of a kind, but the second was worse. Like the other, I woke up on the morning of the battle. But this time, I woke up in the enemy camp. I knew, somehow, that my army had moved on and the enemy came in while I was sleeping. I was surrounded by the enemy and I had to creep out of that camp before they realized I didn't belong there."

Big Odd spoke up from the back of the line. "I like that one better than the one with a thousand arrows falling out of the sky on me."

"Maybe, Odd, but you weren't there. Loneliest I ever been, waking up in that camp surrounded by the enemy."

"I'm starting to feel that way about the ruins," said Quinix.

Thorn nodded. "I'm not sure when it happened, but I think we're in an enemy camp. Only difference is, they already know we're here."

"If there's an army of wights in here," Mara said, "why haven't they come after us?"

"Wights are solitary creatures," said Quinix. "They hunt alone. They

aren't wolves—they don't hunt in packs."

"Maybe they ain't here just to hunt," said Thorn. "This feels more like the raids on the timber camps. Maybe they see us as scouts, and they don't want to attack the scouts until they're ready to move on the main force."

"I'd rather be in the Duck," said Big Odd. Thorn glanced behind him and saw the big man turn a full circle, his longspear gripped tightly in both hands.

Thorn gestured for the line to stop, and then motioned Quinix up. "Let's have a look at that scrying tablet."

Quinix removed the wooden plate from his pack and set it out where the cobblestones were mostly level. He poured the iron balls from the pouch into his hand, and then dropped them one by one onto the surface of the scrying tablet. The balls spun around and around, crossing the orbits of the others, back and forth. Thorn had to blink his eyes to keep his vision from losing focus as he watched.

There were nine balls in all, and none of them dropped off the edge of the plate. Thorn counted four on each side of them, spaced out in twin arcs, nice and even, and one behind. The first thought that flashed through his mind was that it looked a lot like a hexing circle. Except this time, it was his crew that had been tricked.

Quinix's mouth dropped open and he drew in a breath, but Thorn held a gloved finger to his lips. "Steady, boy," he said quietly. "Go ahead and stow that away." He got Big Odd's attention and drew a circle in the air with his hand. Big Odd nodded. The mastiff growled and the hackles on the back of his thick neck stood up.

Thorn would have liked to draw his sword if he was about to be ambushed. On the other hand, he figured baring steel might be just the signal the wights were waiting on. He looked down the street and saw an intersection about fifty strides ahead. If they went straight, they'd be heading towards the falls and deeper into the city. That was no good. If they went left, the street would lead them down to the river. Not much better.

"How far you figure we are from the western edge of the ruins?"

Quinix looked around and his brow creased. "Half a mile. No more."

Thorn nodded. "All right, let's tighten up the line a bit. We'll go on up to the next street there and head west. It'll drop us into the wood, if we get that far, but it's better than where we are."

"What if that street's a dead-end?" Mara asked.

"It ain't. Let's move, nice and easy."

Thorn took three steps before the wights attacked.

A pale form streaked down from above and landed lightly on its feet in front of him. The wight was painted head to toe in black stripes, offset against its bone-white skin. It bared its teeth and hissed. The wight advanced, gripping bronze knives lightly in both hands.

Thorn took a step back and drew his sword, letting the wight get the smell of the iron in the blade. The wight came at him with no warning, bursting into

sudden motion, and it was so fast Thorn didn't see much but a blur of black and white. He retreated, thrusting blindly, trying to keep some distance between himself and his attacker. The wight spun aside and Thorn saw the glint of sunlight on bronze. He felt the light touch of metal across his left bicep, and then a burning pain blossomed in his arm and shoulder.

The mastiff saved him, as he had so many times before. The huge dog leaped from behind Thorn and struck the wight in the chest, slamming it onto the cobbles flat on its back. The dog had its jaws on the wight's throat and shook its head savagely, but Thorn saw the creature grip one of the knives and lift it for a killing blow. He scrambled forward and brought his sword down on the wight's arm, cleanly severing its hand.

Thorn looked back down the street. Mara was firing her bow up at the rooftops, one arrow after another, draw, aim, loose. Quinix was standing behind him, clutching a stone in one fist and his knife in the other, though Thorn didn't expect him to do much with either. Blind Tom stood calmly with his head cocked to the side, doing about as much as a blind man probably could, considering the circumstances. Big Odd faced away from Thorn, his spear leveled, backpedaling slowly up the street towards the rest of the group.

Over Big Odd's shoulder, at the other end of the street the way they had come, Thorn saw a wight step out into view. His hands and arms were red from the tips of his fingers to his elbows. Thick stripes wound around his legs, a red line ran down his chest and belly and one side of his face was painted red. The wight held a short bronze sword in one hand and a hatchet in the other. He spun the sword in his hand and advanced towards Big Odd.

It wasn't hard to figure out which one was Redmourn. Thorn yelled, "Run!" and waited long enough for Quinix, Mara and Blind Tom to get past him before he turned and followed. He heard wights dropping into the street behind them, but he didn't look back until they reached the intersection. What he saw opened up a hollow pit in his stomach.

Big Odd wasn't running. He was still standing in the middle of the street, waiting for Redmourn to come on. "Odd," Thorn screamed, "get out of there!"

Big Odd darted a glance over his shoulder and grinned. Then he gave his head a little shake and turned away. He slammed the butt of his spear against the cobblestones and dropped into a crouch. Thorn could see half a dozen wights, at least, between him and Big Odd. Mara pulled at his arm but he pushed her away.

When Redmourn was still fifty feet away from Big Odd, the wight broke into a sprint. The giant balanced on the balls of his feet and lined up the deadly iron spear tip with the center of the wight's painted chest. At the last moment, Redmourn dove and rolled forward in a tight ball, right in close under the spear. He came up and the sword flashed high, the hatchet low, and then he spun away, his momentum carrying him past Big Odd a few paces down the street.

The axe had bit into the inside of the big man's knee, and it buckled. Blood fountained from Big Odd's throat where the sword had opened it. He crumpled to his one good knee, the other leg flopped out at an ugly angle. Redmourn tucked the hatchet and sword in his belt and grabbed Big Odd by the hair to stop him from toppling over. He held him there and looked down the street. He looked right at Thorn, but no other expression crossed his face. He tore the iron torq from the big man's neck and tossed it away.

Then, very slowly, Redmourn leaned down, nuzzled Big Odd like a lover and drank from his gushing throat.

Thorn couldn't move. He couldn't count the number of battles he'd been in, the number of men he'd seen die, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. Redmourn raised up again and looked back at him. The unpainted side of his face was slick with Big Odd's blood, like half of a dripping red smile. Thorn's head swam and his vision blurred.

A wight came at him, and then tumbled to the side when an arrow thudded into its chest. Mara stepped up in front of Thorn, grabbed the front of his tunic in one fist, and screamed, "Move, damn you!" Her spittle sprayed Thorn's face and he blinked. He pulled her roughly to him, stuck out his sword and felt it slide into the guts of the wight charging at Mara's unprotected back. The creature dropped its bronze knife and looked down in dumb fascination as Thorn pulled his sword free. Blood welled from the wound and burbled from the wight's mouth onto its chin. Thorn stepped forward and chopped the sword down into its skull, cutting through an eye socket all the way down to one high cheekbone.

"Let's go," Thorn said, and he and Mara rejoined Quinix and Blind Tom. They trotted down the side street, moving as quickly as they dared without sacrificing readiness. A wight dropped down ahead of them and it opened a long red wound on the mastiff's flank before the dog brought it down and tore out its throat. Mara paused and aimed her bow up at a painted face that appeared on the rooftop. She loosed, but the arrow clacked off stone and the face disappeared.

The street curved to the right and climbed a low hill. A narrow alley opened onto the street and two wights were there, rushing out of the darkness at Blind Tom. Mara took one down with an arrow through the throat. Thorn intercepted the other, catching an axe with the blade of his sword and deflecting it. He slammed his fist into the wight's throat and it stumbled, choking. Thorn caught it under the arm with his sword on the backswing and it bit deep into the wight's chest and shoulder. He yanked the blade free and kicked the wight in the chest, knocking it back into the darkness of the alley.

How far to the edge of the city? Quinix had said it was half a mile. Thorn could see the edge of the forest ahead as they crested the rise. It seemed impossibly distant. And then the wood, in among the whispering trees—no refuge there. A long way back to the town, a mile, maybe more? Thorn looked behind and saw the painted faces of the wights coming on. Too many to fight.

Redmourn was back there somewhere and he'd be coming, too.

"Run!" he yelled, and they abandoned all pretense of a fighting retreat. They fled, and the wights came after them, silent as wolves pursuing their prey.

The street ended in a small square with a great oak growing in the center of it. Beyond was what might have been a garden but had long ago been taken back by the wild. They ran through the dense undergrowth, Thorn in the lead hacking a trail with his sword. At the back of the garden was an intact wall, ten feet high and covered in ivy. A bronze gate covered in green patina was set into the wall. Thorn's foot crashed into it and it fell away from the stone. Quinix went through, then Mara.

Thorn turned to help Blind Tom through the gate and found him standing there, facing the garden, his iron knife in his hand. He drew a deep cut on the palm of his other hand and smeared blood on the blade, and then he leaned down and traced a five-pointed star in the earth. When he was finished, he thrust the knife into the center and stood up.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" Thorn shouted.

"They won't want to come over the wight's cross. They'll be slow about it, but they'll come over eventually. They'll come over the wall. I can slow 'em down a little. Or I can go with you and slow you down. Reckon I'll stay."

"No one's staying—"

"Stop arguing, Caleb. You know I'm right and you ain't got the time. Give me a sword."

Mara glanced at Thorn as she went past and handed over her sword. "Never use it anyway," she said. "But it's good iron, Tom." He nodded and smiled. He pulled off his pack and reached around in it, pulling out the leather bag that held his hexing stones.

"You take these stones, wizard," he said. "I reckon you're the only one will know what to do with them." Quinix's eyes were shining as he stepped forward and took the bag. "Thank you. I will do my best."

Blind Tom nodded again and turned back towards the city, towards the oncoming wights. They were in the square now, almost to the garden. The mastiff sat on his haunches at his master's side. "You go on with Caleb, dog," said Blind Tom. The dog whined, but he didn't budge.

"Looks like he plans to stay, too," said Thorn. "You tell your father, and your grandfather, and all the rest of them back to the day the world was born…" Thorn's throat tightened up. "You tell them your friends have a score to settle for calling you back too soon."

"Hmph." Blind Tom gripped the sword in one hand and stroked the short fur between the mastiff's ears with the other. The wights came on, moving like pale shadows on stone.

Chapter 9

Thorn tucked the last of his belongings into the top of his pack. A small iron cook pot, a wooden bowl and spoon, a tin cup. Best to put your cooking gear on top, so you didn't have to unload the pack every time your stomach rumbled. He tied the flap down, slapped the top of the pack once to make sure all was secure and sat back on his heels. What did it say about a man when everything he owned, everything he had, fit in one small pack battered and scarred by years on the road?

Nothing good.

"You're running, then," Mara said. Thorn looked over and saw her standing by the stairs down to the taproom.

Thorn turned back to the pack. He started untying the flap again just to have something to do. "I'm leaving. Guess I'll do it at a walk, though. You got to pace yourself on the road."

"And what about me? What would you suggest I do?"

Thorn stopped what he was doing and stared down at his hands. "What do you want to do?"

"I want things to be like they were. I want to spend all day downstairs getting drunk. I want to hunt wights in the wood, when we have to, and then come back and do it all again."

"Well, that's never going to happen. That's over. I took care of that."

Mara laughed. It was a hateful sound. "I knew it! I knew you'd make this all about you."

"It ain't all about me. Just the bad part."

"I always wondered—Big Odd must have been half-again your size. How'd you ever force him out there into the ruins? And Blind Tom, I figured that dog of his would have chewed your arm off if you ever tried to push his master around."

"You all wanted to leave. I talked you into staying."

Mara snorted. "A mark a month and three quints for a bounty talked us into it, same as you."

"I led them to their deaths."

"You ain't enough of a leader to lead a drunk to a chamber pot. That's one of the things I always liked about you. You let everyone have a say, and you actually listen."

"You're right about me not being a leader. Never was any good at it. Too thickheaded, maybe, like my father was. I got their blood on my hands, just the same. It's never coming off."

"So what will you do?"

"I'll head up to Anderland, Karnoven maybe. They're looking for another war. I figure I'll try my hand at soldiering again."

"Guess I can try to find a farmer with half his teeth and go back to plucking chickens."

Thorn stood up and hefted his pack. He turned and looked at her. Her copper hair hung in lank strands and her blue eyes were bright. Her face was streaked with stone dust and tears. “The world ain’t fair, Mara,” he said. “I wish you could find a better life than that, but you’re not—”

“I’m not your responsibility,” Mara finished, and she gave him a cold smile.

Thorn walked over to the stairs and stopped in front of her. He wanted to reach out and touch her face. He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and bring her with him. But he had enough blood on his hands.

“That’s right,” he said. “You never were—none of you were. Guess you’re the lucky one figured that out while you’re still breathing.” He moved past her and went down the stairs.

“I should have stayed with Blind Tom,” she called behind him. “I should have stayed to cover your retreat. I should have died with my friends.”

Thorn let her words chase him down the stairs into the taproom. Before he could reach the door, Ebertus pushed the bearskin aside and strode towards him. Soldiers filed into the Duck after him. He stopped about ten feet away with his hand on his sword.

Ebertus looked Thorn up and down, and sneered. “Seize him.”

Thorn eased out of his pack and let it slide to the floor. He cast his eyes around the room out of habit, even though he knew there was only one way out of the Duck. Ebertus and his squad were standing in front of it. “Seize him for what?”

“Poaching, extortion, murder,” the soldier said, and then shrugged. “Really, whatever it takes to hang you.”

“I’m a lot of things, but a murderer ain’t one of them,” said Thorn. It occurred to him that neglecting to mention the other charges perhaps wasn’t the strongest denial.

“You savagely beat the man called Symus in full view of a dozen or more witnesses. He later succumbed to his injuries. I know—I was at his side when he passed.”

“I’ll bet you were,” said Thorn. He’d beaten more than one man in his life, and he knew he didn’t beat Symus enough to kill him. “I guess you finished him off so he couldn’t talk about your arrangement.”

Ebertus laughed. “You stand accused of extortion, and so you attempt to cast the blame on me. Unfortunately, Lord Viorno is already aware that, while in his paid service, you extorted money from the scavs under his protection and authority. Three quints a bounty, was it not?”

Thorn looked around at the crowd in the taproom. Most of them sat with eyes downcast, no doubt wishing they were somewhere else far away. A few were nodding, though, and Thorn recognized the anger and resentment on their faces. “A bounty ain’t extortion,” he said.

Ebertus arched his eyebrows. “I disagree. We’ll let the noose decide.” He nodded, and the squad moved forward. They relieved Thorn of his weapons

and clapped him in irons. Then, with Ebertus leading the procession, they escorted him roughly out of the Duck and down the street, and they tossed him in a stockade that was little more than a wooden cage.

Caleb Thorn sat in the filthy straw and watched Ebertus and his soldiers walk away laughing. Thunder rolled across the sky and lightning flashed in the west. The heavens opened up and it began to rain.

Chapter 10

Thorn couldn't recall the faces of his wife and son. He tried every night when he went to sleep, and he always failed. He could remember the smell of his wife's hair, the sound of her laughter, the feel of her breasts under his hands. He could remember the curve of her neck, the arch of her back and the softness of her skin. He could remember his son's golden hair, the color of sunlight, and the shape of each of his toes. He could hear his voice the first time he'd said "Da."

But Thorn couldn't remember their faces anymore.

One thing he did remember—what he would never be able to forget—was the sense of helplessness he felt as he held his newborn son and watched his wife die, and later, when the spirits took the boy, too. Rage. Despair. His wife and son had been the only things in the world he truly cared about, and he'd been powerless to help them, or even understand what was happening. *Why* it was happening.

Thorn had known for a long time it had broken something in him. And being broken, it had never troubled him much. The death of his wife and son had left him with nothing, and he'd forged a coat of mail from it. The world couldn't take anything from a man who had nothing. No family, no ties, no cares or desires—he'd made himself invulnerable.

Coward. Thorn wasn't afraid to face death himself—at times, he pursued it. He was afraid someone he cared about would die and he'd be responsible for it. The problem was, he was responsible for the people he cared about whether he accepted that responsibility or not. The only question was whether or not he'd be there for them. Sure as the stars, he wasn't there for them now.

The rain was turning the bottom of the stockade into a fetid swamp, and Thorn finally got tired of sitting in it. He stood and paced to the other side of the cage. Lightning flashed, and in the sudden glare he saw Redmourn standing there, watching him.

Thorn jumped so high he banged his head against the top of the stockade. He scrambled away and pressed his back into the wooden bars, putting as much distance between himself and the wight as he could.

"Good evening, Caleb Thorn."

"I didn't know wights could talk," Thorn said lamely. He was just pleased to discover he hadn't soiled himself.

Redmourn laughed. "For the longest time, I didn't realize blunts could, either. I knew they made sounds, of course, but I never thought it was true speech. No more than the noises made by other animals, the lowing of cattle. In my defense, I heard screaming, for the most part. No one ever recites poetry when I come for them."

"How did you learn to speak our tongue?" Thorn had to admit the wight spoke it better than he did.

"I took a woman. I came to understand later she was some manner of

princess—a woman considered extraordinary by virtue of her parentage. Now it sounds absurdly romantic, but at the time I took her only because I found her comely, for a blunt. I have discovered that a life of toil is weak on beauty and strong on disease and disfigurement. So my choosing a princess was perhaps not so romantic after all. I fed on her and used her, but would you believe she fell in love with me? She became quite devoted. In any event, she taught me to speak her crude language. I find it mildly distasteful, but also undeniably useful on occasion."

"What happened to the woman?"

"She died, tragically. What is it you say, 'ash and air'?"

"You killed her."

"Probably. I was, perhaps, not the ideal paramour."

"What do you want?"

"I find that I want less and less with each passing season. I am quite… melancholy. It is fortunate I so rarely have company, for they would no doubt find me insufferable. You have given me some flicker of passion, however, and for that I am deeply grateful."

"Your lips are moving and words are coming out, but you ain't really saying anything. What do you want?"

"Have you ever experienced loss, Caleb Thorn?"

Thorn swallowed. Maybe wights could read minds.

"I mean *real* loss, the kind that feels like the ending of the world," Redmourn said. "Well, if you have not, let me tell you that it leaves one with a single fervent desire, and that is for things to be as they were. Such a simple desire! One only wants that withering loss to be undone. And of course this is precisely the thing that cannot be. What do I want? I want the blunts to leave this land and never return. I want this city to be whole, to gleam white and proud in the sun once more. I want the world to rise again from its deathbed and reclaim its old glory."

"Well, at least you got a list."

"I want only this—for things to be as they were." Redmourn was silent for a moment, and then continued in a rush. "But this can never be, and so I content myself with a new desire, one that you have given to me. I want to kill you, Caleb Thorn. I want it very badly."

"Come on, then. I doubt your teeth can reach me over here, but maybe you can poke that sword through the bars. Then maybe I'll take it from you and poke you back."

"I think not. I have no desire to slaughter a caged animal—at least, not you. I will let you know the time and the place. You will hear from me very soon."

The wight bowed, and in the time it took to blink, he disappeared into the darkness.

Thorn turned around, gripped the wooden bars of the stockade with both hands, and rested his forehead against them. He took a deep breath and let it

out slowly. “You better hurry if you want to get in line ahead of the hangman.”

Chapter 11

Quinix was unlocking the stockade when Thorn awoke just after dawn. "What are you doing?" he said groggily, rubbing his face. Then, realizing his hands were liberally adorned with mud, filth and sticky straw, he cursed and spat.

"Redmourn was here last night," said Quinix. "You'd better come and see."

Thorn wasn't sure how Lord Viorno would react to his unscheduled furlough, but he didn't plan to sit in the stockade if he didn't have to. He stood and hunched through the small gate, and then walked with the wizard down the street towards the Duck.

A crowd was gathered around Lord Viorno's pavilion, and Thorn pushed and elbowed his way through them to see what they were gawking at. The severed heads of three men were mounted on stakes in front of the Gray's tent: Big Odd, Blind Tom and Lord Viorno himself.

The mastiff was sitting on his haunches next to Blind Tom's head. The dog whined and ducked his nose. Thorn clucked his tongue and the mastiff trotted over to him, tail wagging. Thorn knelt in the mud and scratched the dog's ears. It had some nasty cuts and an open wound that looked like a bite mark on its neck. Blood matted the dog's coarse fur and it seemed to be favoring one leg.

"Look what they did to you," he whispered, and the mastiff whined again.

"Ebertus led a small group of soldiers into the ruins after Redmourn," said Quinix.

"Well, then he's dead, too."

Quinix nodded. "That's why I thought no one would mind if I let you out of the stockade."

"No one left to argue, I guess."

Mara shoved through the crowd, cursing. She had the leather bag Thorn had used to transport wight heads, and now she gently lifted the heads of their friends off the stakes and placed them in the bag. "We'll bury them out back of the Duck," she said. "They'd like that as well as anything else."

"What about Lord Viorno?" said Quinix.

"The Gray can sit there on his bloody stick."

They borrowed a couple of shovels from a peddler selling tools out of the back of a wagon. The peddler wanted a quint for the pair, but Thorn gave him a hard look and he changed his mind. They took the remains of their friends out behind the Duck to a clear patch at the edge of the wood. Thorn dug a hole and then helped Quinix with the other one. When the graves were deep enough, they buried what was left of Big Odd and Blind Tom.

Their work finished, Thorn leaned on the shovel and looked at Mara. "I'm sorry."

"Would you really have left?"

He thought about it a moment. “Yeah, I guess. I would have come back, though.”

“It might have been too late.”

“Probably. I won’t do it again.”

“That’d be good,” Mara said, and smiled. “You want to say some words?”

Thorn nodded and cleared his throat. “Neither man ever had much to say, but when they did it was usually worth listening to. Blind Tom was wise, and he might have been a shaman like his fathers if the world hadn’t gotten too old for it. Big Odd had a way of looking at things different from the rest of us. You could learn something if you figured out how to see them the same way. More than anything else, they were our friends. They fought and bled with us, and in the end they died for us, too. Maybe we’d rather they hadn’t done that, but that don’t matter. All we can do now is tell them we’re grateful for what they gave us and try to do something with it.”

“Thank you,” said Quinix, his voice hoarse.

Mara looked at him sharply, and then nodded. She dropped to her knees and placed her hands on the graves, digging her fingers into the loose earth. “Tom, Odd…I’m grateful for what you did.”

When they were finished at the gravesite, they went to the Duck and toasted their absent friends. The taproom was full—most of the scavs had taken the day off when they saw the heads staked in front of Viorno’s pavilion.

“You know how I met Big Odd?” Thorn said. Mara smiled—she’d heard the story a thousand times. Quinix shook his head and leaned forward with his elbows on the table. “I was in a tavern down on the canals in Sacerta. I was in a foul temper, I guess, and this drunk whore wouldn’t leave me alone. She was hanging on me, and I’d push her away, and finally she sat herself down on my lap. Well, I stood up and dumped her on the floor. So then this sailor comes up and asks me what I think I’m doing, and I say, ‘This whore won’t leave me alone.’”

“And the sailor says, ‘That’s not a whore—that’s my wife,’” Mara finished, laughing so hard her eyes watered.

Thorn grinned. “So the sailor takes a swing and I put him on the floor, and then his whole crew jumps me. They’re beating the spit out of me, and then all of a sudden there’s this giant pulling sailors off me and throwing them across the pub. He’s got fists the size of my head, they’re flying around and sailors are dropping right and left. When it was over, I asked him why he helped me. You know what he said?”

Quinix smiled and shook his head.

“He said, ‘It wasn’t right for you to get beat. You’re the only one in here who ever told her no.’” They all laughed, and Thorn ordered another round of drinks. When the serving girl had gone, he told them about Redmourn’s visit to the stockade.

“We have to kill him,” Mara said when he had finished.

Thorn nodded. “It’s either that or run. He made it pretty clear he was coming for me. He might be coming for both of you, too.”

Quinix’s brow was furrowed and a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Tell me again what he said he wanted.”

“The wight had a way of talking that irritated me,” Thorn said, scratching his chin, “but it was something about wanting things to be the way they were, wanting the city to be whole again, that kind of thing.” Thorn jumped when the wizard’s hand slapped the table. “What is it?”

“There are two theories about the ancients who built Eldernost,” Quinix said. “The respectable view is the one we inherited from Penticus—the ancients were exterminated by the wights.”

“What’s the disrespectable view?” asked Mara.

Quinix smiled. “That would be mine. The ancients weren’t exterminated by the wights—they *are* the wights. Redmourn’s words—well, and the fact that he has words!—is evidence that the disrespectable view is correct.”

“I’m not sure wights could build a city.”

Quinix laughed. “You didn’t know they could speak, either.”

“I guess it’s possible. Redmourn seemed pretty fond of the city. I figured he was just marking his territory. Blind Tom’s dog might show fondness for a tree, but that don’t mean he planted it.”

“I’m sure the wights are territorial, but it’s more than that. It’s…loyalty. Penticus claimed the wights were monsters, little more than beasts, and the Schoolmen never challenged this revered ‘wisdom.’ Never mind that Penticus had never personally encountered a wight or interviewed anyone who had. Clearly, the wights are more than just monsters.”

Thorn shrugged. “Monsters and more, then. I don’t see how it matters any. Maybe blood-drinkers built the city, but they’re still blood-drinkers.”

“They are now. We know they were awash in magic. They depended on it. That’s why we’re all here—because in all the known world, there’s still more magic here than anywhere else. But perhaps it wasn’t enough to sustain them any longer. Magic is fading from the world. What if they needed more?”

“What are you getting at?” Mara asked. She chewed her lip nervously.

“There’s magic in blood. Blind Tom used it when he made his wight’s cross. It is forbidden by the Schoolmen, but there are dark arts—*ancient* arts—that draw upon its power.”

“You’re saying the wights drink blood because they need magic to survive?” said Mara.

Thorn shook his head. “I still don’t see how it matters. They drink blood. Whether they do it because they’re hungry or because they take some magic from it, doesn’t make much difference to me.”

“Do you still want to kill Redmourn?” Quinix asked. Thorn nodded, and the wizard gave a wicked grin. “Have you ever heard of copperas?”

Chapter 12

Redmourn came for him at midday. Thorn had spent most of the night and much of the morning puking his guts into a chamber pot. By the time an excited scav burst into the Duck and announced the wight's arrival, Thorn felt just about ready to die.

Mara grabbed his chin roughly and studied his face. "If you weren't so damn sweaty, I'd think you were a corpse."

"Don't know why I'm sweating when I feel so cold."

"Can you do this, Caleb? You won't kill Redmourn by puking on his shoes."

"Well, he's here. I guess it won't make much difference to him if I'm feeling poorly." Thorn pushed himself up from the table and checked his weapons, and then pulled the iron torq from his neck and set it on the table. He looked at Mara and held her gaze. "If it turns out I ain't up to it, you run like hell and don't look back."

Thorn pushed the bearskin aside and walked out into the middle of the street. Where it passed through the camp, the old stone road was covered over with hard-packed dirt and manure, and the rain had turned it to mud. He looked around at the tents and shanties that pressed in close, saw a few faces peering out at him. Thorn wasn't sure whether he should hate them or be grateful they even cared enough to be curious.

Finally, he looked down the street towards the ruins and saw Redmourn standing there. The wight didn't look any different than he had before, red paint and all. He stood in the middle of the street with his hands at his sides, waiting patiently. Thorn drew his sword and his iron knife, and gestured for the wight to come on. Redmourn flashed a grin and advanced.

Thorn knew it the moment the wight stepped inside the hexing circle. Redmourn bent over, clutching his middle like he was about to heave his breakfast onto the dirt. After the morning he'd had, Thorn knew just how he felt. The wight's legs trembled, then buckled, and he fell to his knees. He raised his head, and Thorn was surprised to see a look on his face that wasn't rage or hatred. He had a little smile that crooked one corner of his mouth, and it was only the exposed fang that made it look like a snarl. It was a look that said, "I can't believe I just fell for that."

"The stones are strong," Redmourn said. "Star-metal, buried in the mud, black as night, and cold. But something else…"

"My wizard rubbed some magic on them."

"Ah, of course," the wight said. "The magic of my fallen city."

"It ain't really yours. Not anymore."

"No, you are right, it is not mine. Not anymore."

"I guess you know I mean to kill you. That's what we came here for, the both of us, and we might as well get to it." Thorn gripped his sword and took a step towards the wight.

“You mistake…discomfort…for incapacitation,” said Redmourn. He climbed slowly to his feet and drew the bronze sword and hatchet from his belt. He cocked his head and looked at Thorn. “For that matter, you do not look entirely well yourself. I believe we can still have our fight, you and I.”

Thorn could have counted the number of duels he’d been in on one hand, and the counting would have left a couple of fingers unused. When he was a soldier, a battle always began with formations, maneuvers and bright banners waving, and it ended in a chaotic melee. The lines met, they merged like vicious, rutting beasts, and before long it was hard to tell friend from foe and even harder to care.

In a melee, a soldier’s most valuable skill wasn’t strength or speed or endurance—it was awareness. If you knew who would try to kill you next, where they were and what they were doing, you’d know how to deal with the man in front of you. You’d see a comrade sink his blade into the enemy, and you’d know he was just moments from turning and putting that steel in your adversary’s back. No need to take any chances—you just had to buy a few seconds until it was time for your opponent to die. Or you’d see an enemy do the same to your ally, and you’d know you had to strike quickly before you got a blade in your own back.

Thorn always felt like he could live through a melee by keeping his wits about him and getting some luck. He’d kill when he had to, but most of it was just a matter of doing his best not to die. Stay alert, commit to the fight only when you had to and wait for the beast to pass you by.

His fight with Redmourn wouldn’t be like that. The beast was watching them both, and it would take one of them before the day was done. Thorn felt the fear spread out inside him, slow and cold. His heart raced and his belly tightened. He always told himself he wasn’t afraid to die, but that wasn’t really the truth. He wasn’t afraid of being dead—dying still scared the piss out of him.

Redmourn stood perfectly still with his weapons at his sides. Thorn moved around the edge of the hexing circle, one foot crossing over the other, and the wight turned with him. Thorn wasn’t so much looking for an opening as steeling himself for what was to come. *Feint with the dagger, thrust with the sword.*

He lunged and Redmourn stepped aside. The wight’s sword flicked out and laid open Thorn’s cheek, from just under his eye down to his chin. Thorn staggered back and pressed the back of his hand against the wound. It came away slick with blood. The wight stood and waited, lowering his weapons once again. Blood dripped from the point of his bronze sword into the mud.

Thorn rushed in and slashed at the wight with his dagger. Redmourn caught it with his hatchet, twisted his wrist, and sent the dagger spinning away. Thorn chopped down with his sword and the wight slapped the blade aside. He swung at Redmourn’s head, and the wight ducked low, hooked the hatchet around the back of his ankle and pulled his leg out from under him.

Thorn teetered and fell flat on his back.

Redmourn circled as Thorn scrambled back to his feet. “Some of my people believe that when you consume a blunt’s blood, you take some of his spirit into you,” the wight said.

Thorn didn’t respond. He’d never had much use for gabbing during a fight, and anyway he didn’t have the breath for it. His chest heaved and his nose whistled as he pulled air in and pushed it back out. He climbed to his feet and advanced. He thrust with the sword—once high, once low—and the wight danced back.

“I think it is nonsense,” Redmourn continued. “I have fed on more blunts than I can count, and every one the same. Perhaps it is merely a superstition, or perhaps blunts have no spirit to take. Who can say? Your friends, the big one and the blind one, they tasted the same.”

Thorn snarled and swung his sword. Redmourn met it with his own blade, and the impact stung Thorn’s hand like a hive of bees. He bulled in, swept a knee into the wight’s groin and heard the air go out of him with a soft hiss. Then Redmourn’s hatchet bit into his side, just above the hip bone, and Thorn’s brief moment of satisfaction was shattered by an explosion of agony. He let out a howl and clasped the wight in a grapple, his right arm around Redmourn’s back, still holding his sword, and his free hand hauling on the wight’s long, fine hair. Thorn sawed awkwardly at Redmourn’s back with the blade and pulled savagely at his hair, wrenching his head to the side.

Then Thorn leaned in and sank his teeth into the wight’s neck. He tore at the flesh, grinding his teeth together, and blood welled in his mouth. Redmourn shrieked and shoved him away. Thorn stumbled back, his wounded hip gave out and he tumbled hard into the mud. He wiped the wight’s blood from his lips with the back of his hand, and spat. “You were right. I don’t taste no spirit, either.”

Redmourn started laughing. He dropped the hatchet and pressed a hand to his neck, pulled it away and looked at the blood on his fingers. “My princess used to bite me, when we were first becoming acquainted. You people simply do not have the teeth for it. We call you blunts because of your flat, blocky faces, you know, but it goes for your teeth as well. The grinding and the gnawing—it really is quite painful.”

“Glad to hear it,” Thorn said. He had a hand pressed against the deep gash in his side, and still his shirt and trousers were soaked with blood. He sat in a pool of it, the edges slowly expanding as he watched. He gripped the hilt of his sword with the blade point-down in the mud and used it to pull himself to his feet. Redmourn darted in and kicked the blade away, and Thorn collapsed on his back.

The wight straddled him, and Thorn lashed out with his fists. Redmourn seized his wrists in either hand and slowly pressed his arms down, pinning them to the ground. Thorn strained, and thrashed, and twisted, but he couldn’t dislodge the wight.

Redmourn flashed his fangs. “This is how it’s done, Caleb Thorn.” The wight bent down and Thorn felt hot breath against his throat. He felt the curious sensation of his skin resisting the fangs, and then he heard a crisp *snick* as it surrendered and the wight’s teeth sank deep.

Thorn stared up into the clear blue sky. The sun was high overhead, but his vision had darkened and the light caused him no discomfort. *It’s time to sleep.* As he had every night for all the years of this, his second life, his life alone, he tried to conjure the faces of his wife and son in his mind. And they were there, finally, at the last.

He saw his wife sitting by the window in the house he had built, rocking their child in her arms. The light touched their golden hair, mother and son, and set it aglow. His wife turned to him and smiled, and it didn’t matter anymore that this image could not be real. He looked into her eyes, blue as the northern sky, and studied the line of her nose, the curve of her lips, the delicate arch of her ears. He looked at his son, eyes closed, thick lashes against fair skin, sleeping peacefully in his mother’s arms. The child’s lips were slightly parted, and his small chest rose and fell with his breathing. Thorn reached for them.

The idyllic portrait was shattered by the sound of Redmourn’s retching. Thorn blinked his eyes, tore his hands free and shoved the wight off of him. Redmourn toppled onto his back and Thorn rolled away. He rose to his hands and knees, and then struggled to his feet.

The wight was choking and coughing, vomiting dark blood onto his face and chest. His back arched, his chest heaved and blood spattered and sprayed with every savage convulsion.

Thorn stumbled over to his sword and winced as he bent down to pick it up. “Copperas,” he said. “It’s iron, of some kind or other. The Schoomen use it to treat thin blood.” He laughed, but it turned into a hiss when the pain flared in his side. “Thin blood. Ain’t that something? Well, that’s how my wizard learned about it, anyway, but he used it in larger doses as a poison. I guess it works even better on wights than it does on merchant princes.”

People were filing out of the Duck now, drifting out of the tents and shanties, too. A few of them had swords or other proper weapons—bandits, probably—and the rest held knives, shovels, hammers and axes. They formed a ragged circle around Thorn and Redmourn, and it tightened slowly as they came on, like a noose around a condemned man’s neck. Thorn felt the show of courage and solidarity was somewhat tardy, but he didn’t dwell on it. They may have been late, but they didn’t have to come out at all.

Jem stepped forward, holding a heavy miner’s pick in both hands. The scav looked to Thorn as if he were asking permission. Thorn nodded and gestured at the wight with his sword. “Go on, then. Make it clean and fast.”

The scav moved up next to the wight and looked around at the others. Thorn had an uneasy feeling about it, looking back at Jem, but that was the thing about uneasy feelings—they came on fast, but a man was always slow to

act on them. The scav raised the pick over his head and brought it down.

"No," Redmourn said, black blood spattering his lips and face. He caught the pick in both hands, the iron tip no more than an inch from his forehead. He moved faster than a striking snake, tearing the pick from Jem's hand and rolling into a crouch. He swung the pick into the side of the scav's head, driving the point through his skull and out the other side. Blood splashed on the ground and the force of the blow hammered Jem's corpse into the mud.

Redmourn charged the line of scavs, and they didn't do much to slow him down. Thorn himself didn't have time to do more than lift his sword and take a few faltering steps after the fleeing wight. Redmourn raced down the street, making for the sanctuary of the trees, and Thorn was stunned by how fast he moved.

An arrow sprouted from the wight's chest. He stumbled ahead a few strides and then stopped, tilting to one side and clawing at the shaft. Thorn looked over at the Duck, up where Mara maintained a position on the roof of the tower. She already had a second arrow nocked. She drew the string back to her cheek and loosed. Redmourn flicked his hand out in a blur and slapped the arrow aside. He started running again, maybe twenty strides from the tree line, and Thorn hobbled down the street after him.

Mara's third arrow planted itself in the wight's guts and the fourth pierced his throat, right under his chin and out the back of his neck. Redmourn fell to his knees, tore the arrow from his throat in a fountain of blood, and started crawling. Thorn came after him, but the wound in his side was on fire and he couldn't walk much faster than Redmourn could crawl.

Quinix came out from behind the Duck and approached the wounded wight cautiously. He held something tightly in one fist, and dragged the iron-barbed net behind him with the other. When he was still well out of the wight's reach, he threw out his hand and a grainy green cloud settled over Redmourn. More copperas—Thorn had been sure the wizard made him eat it all the night before. Redmourn choked and gagged, pawing at his eyes. Quinix took the net in both hands, just like Thorn had showed him, and cast it over the struggling wight.

Redmourn howled and collapsed into the mud. Then he started crawling again. Quinix looked to Thorn with an expression on his face that said he was all out of tricks. Another arrow buzzed down from the tower and pierced Redmourn between the shoulder blades. The iron barbs of the net cut deep into his flesh, and the wight kept crawling. He had reached the edge of the forest by the time Thorn caught up to him.

It occurred to Thorn that if all men died like Redmourn, there might be a lot less killing in the world. No living thing was meant to endure what they'd done to the wight, and yet he still lived. Ragged breaths rasped in and out of him and sprayed blood from the ugly hole in his throat. Where the copperas had touched him, it left hideous burns on the pale flesh, like the work of some caustic acid from an alchemist's laboratory. Angry red wounds flared around

the iron barbs, and jagged black lines radiated from them like cracks in glass.

Redmourn got one arm free of the net. He reached out and placed the palm of his bloody hand on the gnarled roots of a great oak. The wight made a sound, no more than a murmur, and Thorn couldn't tell if it was a word or a dying breath. He placed the point of his sword against the back of Redmourn's neck and pressed down, feeling the blade cut through bone and flesh into the soft, blood-soaked loam of the forest floor.

Thorn stood over the body for a long while, both hands on the hilt of his sword, holding himself upright. After a time, he was joined by Quinix and then by Mara. "That's it, then," the wizard said. "It's over now."

Thorn didn't answer. He cocked his head and listened. He couldn't understand the whispering of the trees, but he knew what it meant. The wood whispered of vengeance.

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